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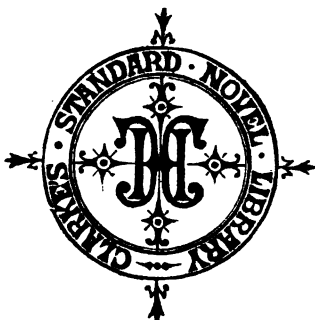
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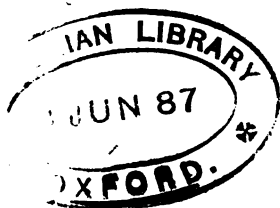
THE
FATAL CORD:
AND
THE FALCON ROVER.

BY
CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,
AUTHOR OF "THE WHITE CHIEF," "THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN," "THE
RIFLE RANGERS," ETC., ETC.



LONDON:
CHARLES H. CLARKE, 13, PATERNOSTER ROW.

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THE FATAL CORD.

CHAPTER I.

A BIVOUAC OF BOY HUNTERS.

A HUNTERS' BIVOUAC under the shadows of a Mississippian forest, in a spot where the trees stand unthinned by the axe of the woodman.

It is upon the Arkansas side of the great river, not far from the town of Helena, and in the direction of Little Rock, the capital of that State.

The scene is a small glade, surrounded by tall cotton-wood trees, one of which on each side, conspicuously 'blazed,' indicates a "trace" of travel. It is that leading from Helena to a settlement on the forks of the White River and Caché.

The time is a quarter of a century ago, when this district of country contained a heterogeneous population,

comprising some of the wildest and wickedest spirits to be found in all the length and breadth of the backwoods border. It was then the chosen home for men of fallen fortunes, lawyers and land speculators, slave-traders and swindlers, hunters, who lived by the pursuit of game, and sportsmen, whose game was cards, and whose quarry consisted of such dissolute cotton planters as, forsaking their homes in Mississippi and Tennessee, had re-established themselves on the fertile bottoms of the St. Francis, the White and the Arkansas.

A glance at the individuals comprising the bivouac in question forbids the supposition that they belong to any of the above. There are six of them; all are boys, the oldest not over twenty, while the youngest may be under sixteen. And though at the same glance you are satisfied that they are but amateur hunters, the game they have succeeded in bringing down shows them gifted not only with skill but courage in the chase.

The carcase of a large bear lies beside them on the sward, his skin hanging from a tree, while several steaks cut from his fat rump, and impaled upon sapling spits, sing pleasantly over the camp fire, sending a savoury odour far into the forest around.

About a dozen huge bear hounds, several showing scars of recent conflict, lie panting upon the grass, while just half this number of saddled horses stand "hitched" to the trees.

The young hunters are in high glee. They have made a creditable day's work of it, and as most of them have to go a good way before reaching home, they have halted in the glade to refresh themselves, their hounds, and their horses.

The chase has provided them with meat of which all are fond; most of them carry a "pine" of corn bread in their saddle bags, and not a few a flask of corn whiskey. They would not be the youth of Arkansas if found unprovided with tobacco. Thus furnished with all the requisites of a backwoods bivouac they are sucking it in gleesome style.

Scanning these young fellows from a social point of view you can see they are not all of equal rank. A difference in dress and equipments bespeaks a distinct standing, even in backwoods society, and this inequality is evident among the six individuals seated around the camp fire. He whom we have taken for the oldest, and whose name is Brandon, is the son of a cotton planter of some position in the neighbourhood. And there is wealth too, as indicated by the coat of fine white linen, the white Panama hat, and the diamond pin sparkling among the ruffles in his shirt bosom.

It is not this, however, that gives him a tone of authority among his hunting companions, but rather an assumption of superior age, combined with perhaps superior strength, and certainly a dash of *bullyism* that

exhibits itself, and somewhat offensively, in both word and action. Most of the dogs are his, as also the fine sorrel horse that stands proudly pawing the ground not far from the fire.

Next to Master Brandon in degree of social standing is a youth, who is also two years his junior, by name Randall. He is the son of a certain lawyer, lately promoted to be judge of the district—an office that cannot be called a sinecure, supposing its duties to be faithfully performed.

After Randall may be ranked young Spence, the hopeful scion of an Episcopal clergyman, whose cure lies in one of the river-side towns, several miles from the scene of the bivouac.

Of lower grade is Ned Slaughter, son of the Helena hotel keeper, and Jeff Grubbs, the heir apparent to Jeff Grubbs, senior, the principal dry goods merchant of the same respectable city.

At the bottom of the scale may be placed Bill Buck, whose father, half horse trader, half corn planter, squats on a tract of poor land near the Caché, of which no one cares to dispute his proprietorship.

Notwithstanding these social distinctions, there is none apparent around the camp fire. In a hunter's bivouac—especially in the South-Western States, still more notably within the limits of Arkansas—superiority does not belong either to fine clothes or far stretching

lineage. The scion of the "poor white hack" is as proud of his position as the descendant of the aristocratic cotton planter; and over the camp-fire in question Bill Buck talked as loudly, ate as choice steaks, and drank as much corn whisky as Alf Brandon, the owner of the hounds and the splendid sorrel horse.

In their smoking there might be noted a difference, Bill indulging in a council pipe, while the son of the planter puffs his principe that has come through the custom-house from Havanna. Luncheon over, it still seems too early to separate for return home, and too late to set the dogs on a fresh bear trail. The corn juice inspires to rouse a kind of diversion, suggesting trials of death or skill. Among these sons of Arkansas cards would have come in; but to their chagrin no one is provided with a pack. Bill Buck regrets this, and also Alf Brandon, and so, too, the son of the Episcopal preacher. They are too far from any settlement to send for such things. Pitch and toss is not sufficiently scientific; "hokey in the hole" is too childish, and it ends in a trial of strength and activity. There is wrestling, jumping over a string, and the leap horizontal. In all of these Alf Brandon proves superior, though closely tackled by the son of the squatter. Their superiority is actually owing to age, for these two are the oldest of the party.

The ordinary sports exhausted, something else is

sought for. A new kind of gymnastics suggest itself, or is suggested, by the stout branch of a cottonwood, stretching horizontally into the glade. It is nearly nine feet from the ground. Who can spring up, seize hold of it, and hang on longest?

Alf Brandon pulls out his gold repeater, formed with a moment hand, and the trial is attempted.

All six succeeded in reaching the limb, and clutching it. All can hang for a time; but in this Bill Buck beats his companions, Brandon showing chagrin.

Who can hang longest with one hand?

The trial is made, and the planter's son is triumphant.

"Bah!" cries the defeated Buck. "Who can hang longest by the neck? Dare any of you try that?"

A yell of laughter responds to this *jeu d'esprit* of the young jean-clad squatter.

CHAPTER II.

TWO TRAVELLERS.

THE silence succeeding is so profound that the slightest sound may be heard to a considerable distance. Though not professional hunters, these young Nimrods of the backwoods are accustomed to keep open ears. It is a

rustling among the reeds that now hinders them from resuming conversation—the canes that hang over the trace of travel. There are footsteps upon it, coming from the direction of Helena. They are soft as the fall of mocassined or female foot. For all this, they are heard distinctly in the glade—hunters, horses, and hounds having pricked up their ears to listen.

Who comes from Helena?

The question has scarce shaped itself when the answer also assumes shape. There are two upon the trace—the foremost, a youth of about eighteen, the other, a girl, at least two years younger.

They are not like enough to be brother and sister. They may be of the same mother, but not father. If their father be the same, they must have come from two mothers.

Both are of interesting personal appearance, strikingly so. The youth is tall, tersely and elegantly formed, with features cast in a mould that reminds one of the Romagna; the same facial outline, the prominent nose and chin, the eagle eye, that in childhood has glanced across the Teverino, or the Tiber, and a complexion equally suggestive of Italian origin, a tinge of Olive in the skin, slightly damasked upon the cheeks, with, above all, a thick *chevelure*, black as the plumage of a buzzard. While different in mien, this youth is dressed altogether unlike any of the young hunters who regard him from

the glade. He is in true hunter costume, slightly partaking of the garb more especially affected by the Indian. His feet are in mocassins, his limbs encased in leggings of green baize cloth, a calico hunting shirt covers his shoulders; while, instead of cap or hat, he wears the "toque," or turban, long since adopted by the semi-civilized tribes of the frontier. He is equipped with powder-horn and bullet-pouch, slung crossways under his arm, armed with a long pea-rifle resting negligently over his left shoulder.

His companion has been spoken off as a girl. The designation stands good; but to describe her will require less minuteness of detail. Sixteen in countenance; older to judge by the budding promise of her beauty; clad in a gown of common homespun, copperas dyed, ill stitched, and loosely adjusted; a skin soft as velvet, and ruddy as rude health can make it; hair to all appearance unacquainted with combs; yet spreading as the sun through a southern window; eyes like stars clipped from the blue canopy of the sky. Such was she who followed, or rather accompanied, the youth in the calico hunting shirt.

A sudden fire flashes into the eyes of Alf Brandon. It is the expression of a spirit not friendly to one of the new comers, which may be easily guessed, for the girl is too young and too fair to have excited hostility in the breast of any one. It is her companion against

whom the son of the planter feels some secret resentment.

He shows it more conspicuously on a remark made by Bill Buck.

"That skunk is always sneaking about with old Book's gal. Wonder her dad don't show more sense than let her keep company wi' a nigger. She ain't a goslin any more—*she* ain't."

Buck's observation displays an animus ill concealed. He, too, has not failed to note the hidden beauty of this forest maiden, who is the daughter of an old hunter of rude habits, living in a cabin close by.

But the sentiments of the horse-dealer's son, less refined, are also less keenly felt. His remarks add fuel to the fire already kindled in the breast of Brandon.

"The nigger thinks entirely too much of himself. I propose, boys, we take the shine out of him," said Brandon, who makes the malicious challenge.

"Do the nigger good," chimes in Slaughter.

"But is he a nigger?" asks Spence, to whom the strange youth has been hitherto unknown. "I should have taken him for a white."

"Three-quarters white—the rest Indian. His mother was a half-bred Choctaw. I've often seen the lot at our store."

It is Grubbs who gives this information.

"Injun or nigger, what's the difference?" proceeded

the brutal Buck. "He's got starch enough for either; and, as you say, Alf Brandon, let's take it out of him. All agreed, boys?"

"All! all!"

"What do you say, Judge Randall! You've not spoken yet, and as you're a judge we wait for your decision."

"Oh, if there's fun to be had, I'm with you. What do you propose doing with him?"

"Leave that to me," says Brandon, turning to the quarter-bred, who at this moment has arrived opposite the camp fire. "Hilloa Choc! What's the hurry? We've been having a trial of strength here—who can hang longest by one arm to this branch? Suppose you put in too, and see what you can do?"

"I don't desire it; besides, I have no time to spare for sport."

The young hunter, halted for only a moment, is about to move on. The companionship thus offered is evidently uncongenial. He suspects that some mischief is meant. He can read it in the eyes of all six; in their faces flushed with corn-whiskey. Their tone, too, is insulting.

"You're afraid you'll get beat," sneeringly rejoins Brandon. "Though you have Indian blood in you, there ought to be enough white to keep you from showing coward."

"A coward! I'll thank you not to repeat that Mr. Alfred Brandon."

"Well, then, show yourself a man, and make the trial. I've heard that you boast of having strong arms. I'll bet that I can hang longer to that branch than you—that any of us can."

"What will you bet you can?" asks the young hunter, stirred, perhaps, by the hope of employing his strength to a profitable purpose.

"My rifle against yours. Looking at the value of the guns, that is quite two to one."

"Three to one," says the son of the storekeeper.

"I don't admit it," answers the hunter. "I prefer my piece to yours, with all its silvering upon it. But I accept your challenge, and will take the bet as you have proposed it."

"Enough. Now, boys, stand by and see fair play. You, Slaughter, you keep time. Here's my watch."

The girl is going away; Brandon evidently wishes she should do so. He has some design—some malice *pre-pense*, of which he does not desire her to be a witness. Whatever it is he has communicated it to his fellows, all of whom show a like willingness for Lena Rook—such is her name—to take her departure. Their free glances and freer speech produce the desired effect. Her father's shanty is not far off. She knows the road without any guidance, and moves off along it, not, however, without

casting a glance towards her late travelling companion, in which might be detected a slight shadow of apprehension.

She has not failed to notice the bearing of the boy hunters, their insulting tone and attitude towards him of Indian taint, who, for all that, has been the companion of her girlhood's life—the sharer of her father's roof, rude and humble as it is. Most of those left in the glade she knows—all of them by name—Buck and Brandon with a slight feeling of aversion.

But she has confidence in Pierre—the only name by which she knows her father's guest—the name given by the man who some six years before entrusted him to her father's keeping; she knows that he is neither child nor simpleton, and against any ordinary danger can well guard himself.

By this sweet reflection allaying her fears she flits forward along the forest path like a young fawn, emboldened by the knowledge that the lair of the protecting stag is safe and near.

CHAPTER III.

HANGING BY ONE HAND.

"How is it to be?" asks Slaughter, holding the watch as if he were weighing it. "By one hand or both?"

"One hand, of course. That was the challenge."

"I propose that the other be tied. That will be the best way, and fair for both parties. There will then be no balancing, and it will be a simple test of strength in the arm used for suspension. The right, of course. Let the left be tied down. What say you, boys?"

"There can be no objection to that. It's equal for both," remarks Randall.

"I make no objection," says Brandon.

"Nor I," assents the young hunter; "tie as you please, so long as you tie alike."

"Good!" ejaculates Bill Buck, with a sly wink to his companions, unseen by the last speaker.

The competitors stand under the branch of the tree ready to be tied. A minute or two sufficed for this. It is done by a piece of string cord looped upon the left wrist, and then carried round the thigh. By this means the left arm is secured against struggling or in anyway lessening the strain upon the right.

Thus pinioned, both stand ready for the trial.

"Who goes first?" is the question asked by Slaughter.

"The challenger, or the challenged?"

"The challenged has the choice," answers Randall.

"Do you wish it, Choc?" he adds, addressing himself to the quarter-bred Indian.

"It makes no difference to me whether first or last," is the simple reply.

"All right, then; I'll go first," says Brandon, springing up, and clutching hold of the limb.

Slaughter, entrusted with the duty, appears to take note of the time.

One—two—three—three minutes and thirty seconds—told off on the dial of his watch, and Brandon drops to the ground.

He does not appear to have made much of an effort. It is strange he should be so indifferent to the losing of a splendid rifle, to say nothing of the humiliation of defeat.

Both seem in store for him, as the young hunter, bracing himself to the effort, springs up to the branch.

One—two—three—four—five. Five minutes are told off, and still does he remain suspended.

"How much longer can you stand it, Choc?" asks Bill Buck, with a significant intonation of voice. "Most done, ain't ye?"

"Done!" scornfully exclaimed the suspended hunter.

"I could stand it three times as long, if needed. I suppose you're satisfied I've won?"

"A hundred dollars against my own rifle you don't hang five minutes more."

This comes from Brandon.

"I'll take the bet," is the rejoinder.

"Since you're so confident, then, you'll have to win or be hanged."

"What do you mean by that? What are you doing behind me?" asked the young hunter.

These questions are put under a suspicion that some trick is being played. He hears a whispering behind him, and a rustling of leaves overhead.

"Only taking the precaution that you don't hurt yourself by the fall," is the answer given to the last.

It is followed by a peal of loud laughter, in which all six take part.

The young gymnast, still clinging to the branch, wonders what is making them so merry. Their speeches have suggested something sinister, and glancing upward he discovers the trick played upon him. There is a rope around his neck, with a running nose, its other end attached to a branch above. It has been adjusted in such manner that were he to let go his hold the noose would close around his throat, with his feet still dangling in the air.

"Hang on!" cried Slaughter, in a mocking tone.

"Hang on, I advise you. If you let go you'll find your neck in a noose."

"You'll keep the time, Slaughter," directs Brandon. "Five minutes more. If he drops within that time, let him do so. Well, then, see how long the nigger can hang *by his neck*."

Another loud laugh rings through the glade, echoed by all except him who is the subject of it.

The young hunter is furious—almost to frenzy. His cheek has turned ashy pale—his lips too. Fire flashes in his coal-black eyes. Could he but descend safely from the tree, at least one of his torturers would have reason to repent the trick they have put upon him.

He dare not let go his hold; he sees the set snare, and knows the danger of falling into it. He can only await till they may please to release him from his perilous position.

But if patient, he is not silent.

"Cowards!" he cries, "cowards every one of you; and I'll make every one of you answer for it: you'll see if I don't."

"Come, come, nigger," retorts Brandon, "don't talk that way, or we'll not let you down at all. As good as you have been hanged in these woods for too much talking. Ain't he a nice looking gallows bird just now? Say, boys! Suppose we call back the girl, and let her

have a look at him? Perhaps she'd help him out of his fix. Ha! ha! ha!"

"You'll repent these speeches, Alfred Brandon," gasps the young man, beginning to feel his strength failing him.

"You be hanged—yes, hanged, ha! ha! ha!"

Simultaneous with the laugh a deer-hound, straying by the edge of the glade, gave out a short, sharp growl, which is instantly taken up by those lying around the camp fire. At the same instant is heard a snort, perfectly intelligible to the ears of the amateur hunters.

"A bear! a bear!" is the cry uttered by all, as the animal itself is seen dashing back into the cane-brake, out of which it had come to reconnoitre.

In an instant the hounds are after it, some of them already hanging to its hams, while the six hunters suddenly rush to their guns, and flinging themselves into their saddles, oblivious of all else, spur excitedly after.

In less than twenty seconds from the first howl of the hound there is not a soul in the glade, save that now in real danger of parting from the body that contains it.

The young hunter is left hanging—alone!

CHAPTER IV.

A FORCED FREEDOM.

YES: The young hunter is left hanging alone ; hanging by hand and arm ; soon to be suspended by the neck.

Good God ! is there no alternative ? No hope of his being rescued from his perilous situation ?

He sees none for himself. He feels that he is powerless ; his left hand is fastened to his thigh with a cord that cannot be stretched or broken. He tries wrenching the wrist with all his strength, and in every direction. The effort is idle, and ends only in the laceration of his skin.

With the right hand he can do nothing. He dare not remove it from the limb ; he dare not even change its hold. To unclasp it would be certain strangulation.

Can he not throw up his feet, and by them elevate himself upon the branch ? The idea at once suggests itself ; and he at once attempts its execution. He tries once, twice, thrice, until he proves it impossible. With both arms it would have been easy ; or with one at an earlier period. But the strain has been too long continued, and he sees that the effort is only bringing him

nearer to his end. He desists, and once more hangs vertically from the limb.

Is there no hope from hearing? He listens. There is no lack of sounds. There is the baying of dogs at intervals, culminating in grand chorus, or breaking into short, sharp barks, as the bear gives battle; there is the bellowing of bruin himself, mingled with the crackling of cane, as he makes his way through the thick-set culms; and, above all, the shouts and wild yelling of his human pursuers.

"Are they human?" asks he whom they have left behind. "Can it be that they have abandoned me to this cruel death?"

"It can—they have," is the agonized answer, as the sounds of the chase come fainter from the forest. "They have—they have," he repeats, and then, as the tide of vengeance surges up in his heart, he cries, through clenched teeth, "O God; give me escape—if but to avenge myself on those villains who have outraged your own image. O God! look down in mercy! Send some one to deliver me!"

Some one to deliver him! He has no hope that any of his late tormentors will return to do it. He had but little from the first. He knows them all, except Spence, the son of the clergyman; and from the late behaviour of this youth, he has seen that he is like the rest. All six are of the same stamp and character, the most

dissolute scamps in the country. No hope now ; for the bear hunt has borne them far away, and even their yells are no longer heard by him.

Hitherto he has remained silent. It seemed idle to do otherwise. Who was there to hear him, save those who would not have heeded. And his shouts would not have been heard among the howling of hounds, the trampling of horses, and the shrill screeching of six fiends in human form.

Now that silence is around him—deep, solemn silence—a new hope springs up within his breast. Some one *might* be near, straying through the forest or travelling along the trace. He knows there is a trace. Better he had never trodden it!

But another might be on it. Some one with a human heart. Oh, if it were only Lena!

“Hilloa!” he cries, again and again; “help, help! For the love of God, give help!”

His words are repeated, every one of them, and with distinctness. But, alas, not in answer, only in echo. The giant trunks are but taunting him. A fiend seems to mock him far off in the forest!

He shouts till he is hoarse—till despair causes him to desist. Once more he hangs silent. A wonder he has hung so long. There are few boys, and perhaps fewer men, who could for such a time have sustained the terrible strain, under which even the professional gymnast

might have sunk. It is explained by his training, and partly by the Indian blood coursing through his veins. A true child of the forest—a hunter from earliest boyhood—to scale the tall tree, and hang lightly from its limbs, was part of his education. To such as he the hand has a grasp prehensile as the tail of the American monkey, the arm a tension not known to the sons of civilization.

Fortunate for him it is thus, or perhaps the opposite, since it has only added to his misery by delaying the fate that seems certainly in store for him.

He makes this reflection as he utters his last cry, and once more suffers himself to droop despairingly. So strongly does it shape itself, that he thinks of letting go his hold, and at once and for ever putting an end to his agony.

Death is a terrible alternative. There are few who do not fear to look it in the face—few who will hasten to meet it, so long as the slightest spark of hope glimmers in the distance. Men have been known to spring into the sea, to be swallowed by the tumultuous waves; but it was only when the ship was on fire, or certainly sinking beneath them. This is but fleeing from death to death, when all hope of life is extinguished. Perhaps it is only madness.

But Pierre Robideau—for such is the name of the young hunter—is not mad, and not yet ready to rush to the last terrible alternative.

It is not hope that induces him to hold on—it is only the dread horror of death.

His arm is stretched almost to dislocation of its joints—the sinews drawn tight as a bow-string, and still his fingers clutch firmly to the branch, lapped like iron round it.

His cheeks are colourless; his jaws have dropped till the lips are agape, displaying his white teeth; his eyes protrude as if about to start forth from their sockets.

And yet out of these wild eyes one more glance is given to the glade—one more sweep among the trunks standing around it.

What was seen in that last glaring look?

Was it the form of a fair girl dimly outlined under the shadow of the trees? or was it only that same form conjured up by a fancy flickering on the edge of eternity?

No matter now. It is too late. Even if Lena were there she would not be in time to save him. Nature, tortured to the last throes, can hold out no longer. She relaxes the grasp of Pierre Robideau's hand, and the next moment he is seen hanging under the branch, with the tightened noose around his neck, and his tongue protruding between his lips, livid with the dark mantling of death!

CHAPTER V.

TWO OLD CHUMS.

"BOUND for Kaliforny, air ye?"

"Yes; that's the country for me."

"If what you say's true, it oughter be the country for more'n you. Air ye sure 'beout it?"

"Seein's believing. Look at this."

The man who gave utterance to the old saw pulled from his pocket a small packet done up in fawn skin, and untying the string, exhibited some glistening nodules of a yellowish colour.

"True; seein' air believin', they do say, an' feelin' air second nater. Let's lay my claw on't."

The packet was passed into his hands.

"Hang me ef't don't look like gold! an' it feel like it, too; an', durn me, ef't don't taste like it."

This after he had put one of the nodules in his mouth, and rolled it over his tongue, as if testing it.

"It *is* gold," was the positive rejoinder.

"An' ye tell me, Dick Tarleton, they find these sort o' nuts in Kaliforny lyin' right on the surface o' the groun'?"

"Almost the same. They dig them out of the bed of

a river, and then wash the mud off them. The thing's been just found out by a man named Captain Sutter while they were clearing out a mill-race. The fellow I got these from's come direct from there with his bullet pouch chock full of them, besides several pounds weight of dust in a canvas bag. He was in New Orleans to get it changed into dollars; an' he did it, too, five thousand in all, picked up, he says, in a spell of three months' washing. He's going right back."

"Durn me ef I oughten't to go too. Huntin' ain't much o' a bizness hyar any longer. Bar's gettin' pretty scarce, an' deer's most run off altogether from the settlements springin' up too thick. Besides, these young planters an' the fellers from the towns air allers 'beout wi' thar blasted horns, scarin' everything out of creashun. Thar's a ruck o' them kine clost by hyar 'beout a hour ago, full tare arter a bar. Durn 'em! What hev they got to do wi' bar-huntin'—a parcel o' brats 'o boys? Jess as much as this chile kin do' to keep his ole karkidge from starvin'; and thar's the gurl, too, growin' up, an' nothin' provided for her but this ole shanty, an' the patch o' gurdan groun'. I'd pull up sticks and go wi' ye, only for one thing."

"What is that, Rook?"

"Wal, wal; I don't mind tellin' you, Dick. The gurl's good lookin', an' thar's a rich young feller 'pears a bit sweet on her. I don't much like him myself; but

he *air* rich, or's boun' to be when the old 'un goes under. He's an only son, an' they've got one o' the slickest cotton plantations in all Arkansaw."

"Ah, well; if you think he means marrying your girl, you had, perhaps, better stay where you are."

"Marryin' her! Durn him, I'll take care o' thet. Poor as I am myself, an' as you know, Dick Tarleton, no better than I mout be, she hain't no knowin' beout that. My little gurl, Lena, air as innocent as a young doe. I'll take precious care nobody don't come the humbugging game over her. In coorse you're gwine to take your young 'un along wi' ye?"

"Of course."

"Wal, he'll be better out o' hyar, any how. Thar a wild lot, the young fellars 'beout these parts; an' I don't think over friendly wi' him. 'Tall events, *he* don't sort wi' *them*. They twit him 'beout his Injun blood, and that sort o' thing."

"D——n them! he's got *my* blood."

"True enuf, true enuf; an' ef they knew thet, it wudn't be like to git much favour for him. You dud well in makin' him grass under the name o' the mother. Ef the folks 'beout hyar only knowed he war the son o' Dick Tarleton—Dick Tarleton thet——"

"Hush! shut up, Jerry Rook! Enough that you know it. I hope you never said a word of that to the boy. I trusted you."

"An' ye trusted to a true man. Wi' all my backslidin's I've been true to you, Dick. The boy knows nothin' 'beout what you've been, nor me neyther. He air as innocent as my own gurl Lena, tho' of a diff'rent natur altogither. Tho' he be three parts white, he's got the Injun in him as much as ef he'd been the colour o' copper. Le's see; it air now nigh on six year gone since ye seed him. Wal, he's wonderful growed up an' good-lookin'; and thar arn't anythin' 'beout these parts kud tackle on to him fur strenth. He kin back a squirrel wi' the pea rifle, tho' thet 'won't count for much now ef ye're gwine to set him gatherin' these hyar donicks an' dusts. Arter all, thet may be the best for him. Huntin' ain't no account any more. I'd gi'e it up myself ef I ked get some eesier way o' keepin' my wants serplied."

The man to whom these remarks were made did not give much attention to the last of them.

A proud fire was in his eye as he listened to the eulogy passed upon the youth, who was his son by Marie Robideau, the half-breed daughter of a famous fur-trader. Perhaps, too, he was thinking of the youth's mother, long since dead.

"He will soon be here?" he inquired, rousing himself from his reverie.

"Oughter," was the reply. "Only went wi' my gurl to the store to git some fixin's. It air in Helena, 'beout

three mile by the old trace. Oughter be back by this. I war expectin' 'em afore you kim in."

"What's that?" asked Tarleton, as a huge bear-hound sprang from his recumbent position on the hearth, and ran growling to the door.

"Them, I reck'n. But it moutn't be ; thar's plenty o' other people abeout. Make safe, Dick, an' go in thar', into the gurl's room, till I rickaneitre."

The guest was about to act upon the hint, when a light footstep outside, followed by the friendly whimpering of the hound, and the soft voice of her on whom the dog was fawning, caused him to keep his place.

In another second, like a bright sunbeam, a young girl—Lena Rook—stepped softly over the threshold.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRY OF DISTRESS.

LENA ROOK knew the father of Pierre, and curtsied as she came in.

It was six years since she had seen him ; but she still remembered the man who had stayed some days at her father's house, and left behind him a boy, who had afterwards proved such a pleasant playmate.

"Whar's Pierre?" asked her father. "Didn't he kum back from Helena along wi' ye?"

The guest simultaneously asked a similar question, for both had noticed a slight shadow on the countenance of the girl.

"He did," answered she, "as far as the clearing in the cane-brake, just over the creek."

"He stopped thar. What for?"

"There was a party of hunters—boys."

"Who mout they be?"

"There was Alf Brandon, and Bill Buck, and young Master Randall, the judge's son, and there was Jeff Grubbs, the son of Mr. Grubbs, that keeps the store, and Slaughter's son, and another boy I don't remember ever seeing before."

"A preecious pack o' young scampgraces, every mother's son o' 'em, 'ceptin the one you didn't know, an' he can't be much different, seein' the kumpany he air in. What war they a doin'?"

"They had hounds and horses. They had killed a bear."

"Killed a bar! Then that's the lot that went scurryin' up the crik, while ago. Durn 'em! they never killed the bar. The houn's dud it for 'em. Ye see how it air, Dick? Who the Eternal ked make his bread out o' huntin' hyar, when sech green goslins as them goes screamin' through the woods wi' a hul pack o' houn's to drive the game hillward! How d'ye know, gurl, thet they killed a bar?"

"I saw it lying on the ground, and the skin hanging to a tree."

"Skinned it, too, did they?"

"Yes. They had a fire, and they had been roasting and eating some of it. I think they had been drinking too. They looked as if they had, and I could smell whiskey about the place."

"But what kept Pierre among 'em?"

"They were trying who could hang longest to the branch of a tree. As Pierre was coming past, Alf Brandon stopped him, and challenged him to try too; then offered to make a bet—their rifles, I think—and Pierre consented, and I came away."

"Pierre should have kum along wi' ye, an' left them to theirselves. I know Alf Brandon don't owe the boy any goodwill, nor Bill Buck neyther, nor any o' that hul lot. I reckon they must a riled him, and roused his speerit a bit."

As the old hunter said this, he stepped over the threshold of the door, and stood outside, as if looking out for the coming of Dick Tarleton's son.

Seeing that he was listening, the other two, to avoid making a noise, conversed in a low tone.

"I kin hear the houn's," remarked Rook, speaking back into the cabin. "Thar's a growl! Durn me, ef they hain't started suthin'. Thar they go, an' the curs yellin' arter 'em as ef hell war let loose. Wonder what it kin mean? Some varmint must a crawled right inter thar camp. Wal, Pierre ain't like to a gone along wi' 'em, seein' as he's got no hoss. I reck'n we'll soon see him hyar, an' maybe Alf Brandon's rifle along wi' him. Ef it's bin who kin hang longest to the branch of a tree, I'd back him agin the toughest-tailed possum in all these parts. Ef that be the tarms o' the wager, he'll git the gun."

The old hunter returned chuckling into the cabin.

Some conversation passed between him and his daughter, about getting dinner for their guest; and then, thinking that the expected Pierre was a long time in showing himself, he went out again, and stood listening as before.

He had not been many moments in this attitude, when he was seen to start, and then listen more eagerly with an uneasy look.

Tarleton, looking from the inside, saw this, and so too the girl.

"What is it, Jerry?" inquired the former, moving hastily towards the door.

"Durned if I know. I heerd a shriek as ef some'dy war in trouble. Yes, thar 'tis agin! By the Eternal, it's Pierre's voice!"

"It is father," said Lena, who had glided out, and stood listening by his side. "It is his voice; I could tell it anywhere. I fear they have been doing something. I'm sure those boys don't like him, and I know they were drinking."

"No, Dick! don't you go. Some of them young fellurs might know you. I'll go myself, and Lena kin kum along wi' me. My gun, gurl! An' you may kum, too, ole Sneezer; you'd be more'n a match for the hul pack o' thar curs. I tell ye, you shan't go, Dick! Git inside the shanty, and stay thar till we kum back. Maybe, 'tain't much; some lark o' them young scamp-graces. Anyhow, this chile 'll soon see it all straight. Now, Lena! arter yur ole dad.

At the termination of this chapter of instructions, the hunter, long rifle in hand, hound and daughter close following upon his heels, strode off at the

double-quick in the direction in which he had heard the cries.

For some moments their guest stood outside the door, apparently unresolved as to whether he should stay behind or follow his host. But, a shadow passing over his face, showed that some sentiment—perhaps fear—stronger than affection for his son, was holding him in check; and, yielding to this, he turned, and stepped back into the shanty.

A remarkable-looking man was this old acquaintance of Jerry Rook; as unlike the hunter as Hyperion to the Satyr. He was still under forty years of age, while Jerry had outlived the frosts of full sixty winters. But the difference between their ages was nothing compared with that existing in other respects. While Jerry, crooked in limb and corrugated in skin, was the beau ideal of an old borderer, with a spice of the pirate in him to boot, Richard Tarleton stood straight as a lance, and had been handsome as Apollo.

Jerry, clad in his half-Indian costume of skin cap and buck-leather, looked like the wild woods around him, while his guest in white linen shirt and shining broad-cloth, seemed better suited for the streets of that city from which his conversation showed him to have lately come.

What strange chance has brought two such men together? And what stranger episode had kept them

bound in a confidence neither seemed desirous of divulging?

It must have been a dark deed on the side of Dick Tarleton—a strong fear that could hinder a father from rushing to the rescue of his son!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BODY TAKEN DOWN.

THE glade is silent as a graveyard, with a tableau in it far more terribly solemn than tombs. A fire smoulders unheeded in its centre, and near it the carcass of some huge creature, upon which the black vultures, soaring aloft, have fixed their eager eyes.

And they glance too at something upon the trees. There is a broad black skin suspended over a branch; but there is more upon another branch—there is a *man*!

But for the motions lately made by him the birds would ere this have descended to their banquet.

They may come down now. He makes no more motions, utters no cry to keep them in the air affrighted. He hangs still, silent, apparently dead.

Even the scream of a young girl rushing out from the

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underwood does not stir him, nor yet the shout of an old man sent forth under like excitement.

Not any more when they are close to the spot with arms almost touching him—arms upraised and voices loud in lamentation.

“It is Pierre! Oh, father, they have hanged him! Dead—he is dead!”

“Hush gurl! Maybe not,” cries the old man, taking hold of the loose limbs and easing the strain of the rope.

“Quick! come under here, catch hold as you see me, an’ bear up wi’ all your strength. I must git my knife out and spring up’ard to git at the durned rope. Thet’s it. Steady, now.”

The young girl has glided forward, and, as directed, taken hold of the hanging limbs. It is a terrible task—a trying, terrible task even for a backwoods maiden. But she is equal to it; and bending to it with all her strength, she holds up what she believes to be the dead body of her playmate and companion. Her young heart is almost bursting with agony as she feels that in the limbs embraced there is no motion—not even a tremor.

“Hold on hard,” urges her father. “Thet’s a stout gurl. I won’t be a minnit.”

While giving this admonition, he is hurrying to get hold of his knife.

It is out, and

With a spring upward, as if youth had returned to his sinews, the old hunter succeeds in reaching the rope. It is severed with a "snig!" and the body, bearing the girl along with it, drops to the ground.

The noose is instantly slackened and switched off; the old hunter with both hands embraces the throat, pressing the windpipe back into it; then, placing his ear close to the chest, listens.

With eyes set in agonised suspense, and ears also; Lena listens, too, to hear what her father may say.

"Oh! father, do you think he is dead? Tell me he still lives."

"Not much sign o' it. Heigh! I thort I seed a tremble. You run to the shanty. Thar's some corn whisky in the cubberd. It's in the stone bottle. Bring it hyar. Go, gurl, an' run as fast as your legs kin carry ye!"

The girl springs to her feet, and is about starting off.

"Stay, stay! It won't do to let Dick know; this'll drive *him* mad. Durn me, if I know what ter do. Arter all he may as well be told on't. He must find it out, sooner or later. That must be, an' dog-gone it 'twon't do to lose time. Ye may go. No, stay! No, go—go! an' fetch the bottle; ye needn't tell him what it's for. But he'll know thars suthin' wrong. He'll be sure to know. He'll come back along wi' ye. That's equilly sartin. Well, let him. Maybe thet's the best. Yes, fetch him back wi' ye. Thar's no danger o' them chaps -

showin' here arter this, I reck'n. Hurry him along but don't forget the bottle. Now, gurl, quick as lightnin', quick!"

If not quite so quick as lightning, yet fast as her feet can carry her, the young girl starts along the trace leading to the shanty. She is not thinking of the sad tidings she bears to him who hides in her father's cabin. Her own sorrow is sufficient for the time, and stifles every other thought in her heart.

The old hunter does not stand idly watching her. He is busy with the body, doing what he can to restore life. He feels that it is warm. He fancies it is still breathing.

"Now, how it came about?" he asked himself, scanning the corpse for an explanation. "Tied one o' his hands an' not the tother! Thar's a puzzle. What can it mean?"

"They must a meant hangin' anyhow, poor young fellar! They've dud it sure. For what? What ked he hev done, to hev engered them? Won the rifle for one thing, an' thet they've tuk away.

"The hul thing hez been a trick; a durned, infernal, hellniferous trick o' some sort.

"Maybe they only meant it for a joke. Maybe they only intended scarin' him; an' jess then that varmint kim along, an' sot the houn's on to it, an' them arter, an' they sneaked off 'thout thinkin' o' him? Wonder ef that was the way.

"Ef it warn't, what ked a purvoked them to this drefful deed? Durn me ef I kin think o' a teezun.

"Wal, joke or no joke, it hev ended in a tregidy—a krewel tregidy. Poor young fellar!

"An'.dog-gone my cats! ef I don't make 'em pay for it, every mother's chick o' 'em. Yes, Mr. Alf Brandon, an' you, Master Randall, an' you, Bill Buck, an' all an' every one o' ye.

"Ya! I've got a idea; a durned splendifrous idea! By the Eternal, I kin make a good thing out o' this. Well thought o', Jeremiah Rooke; ye've hed a hard life o't lately; but ye'll be a fool ef ye don't live eezier for the future, a darned greenhorn o' a saphead! Oh, oh! ye young bloods an' busters! I'll make ye pay for this job in a way ye ain't thinkin' o', cussed ef I don't.

"What's fust to be done? He musn't lie hyar. Somebody mout kum along, an' that 'ud spoil all. Ef 'twar only meent as a joke they mout kum to see the end o't. I heerd shots. That must a been the finish o' the anymal. Tain't likely they'll kum back, but they may; an' ef so, they musn't see this. I'll tell them I carried the corp away and berried it. They won't care to inquire too close 'beout it.

"An' Dick won't object. I won't let him object. What good would it do him? an' t'other 'll do me good, a power o' good. Keep me for the balance o' my days. 'et Dick go a gold gatherin' his own way, I'll go mine.

"Thar ain't any time to lose. I must toat him 'o the shanty ; load enough for my old limbs. But I'll meet them a comin', an' Dick an' the gurl kin help me. Now, then, my poor Pierre, you come along wi' me."

This strange soliloquy does not occupy much time. It is spoken *sotto-voce*, while the speaker is still engaged in an effort to resuscitate life ; nor is he yet certain that Pierre Robideau is dead, while raising his body from the ground and bearing it out of the glade.

Staggering under the load, for the youth is of no light weight, he re-enters the trace conducting to his own domicile. The old bear-hound slinks after with a large piece of flesh between his teeth, torn from the carcase of the butchered bear.

The vultures, no longer scared by man's presence, living or dead, drop down upon the earth, and strut boldly up to their banquet.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OATH OF SECRECY.

WHILE the black buzzards are quarrelling over the carcase, not far off there is another carcase stretched upon the sward, also of a bear.

But the grouping around it is different; six hunters on horseback and double the number of dogs.

They are the boy hunters late bivouacking in the glade, and the bear is the same that had strayed unwittingly into their camp.

The animal has just succumbed under the trenchant teeth of their dogs, and a bullet or two from their rifles. Nor have the hounds come off unscathed. Two or three of them, the young and rash, lie dead beside the quarry they assisted in dragging down.

The hunters have just ridden up and halted over the black, bleeding mass. The chase, short and hurried, is at an end, and now for the first time since leaving the glade do they seem to have stayed for reflection. That which strikes them is, or should be, fearful.

"My God!" cries young Randall, "the Indian! We've left him hanging."

"We have, by the Lord!" seconds Spence, all six turning pale, and exchanging glances of consternation.

"If he have let go his hold——"

"If! He must have let go; and long before this. It's full twenty minutes since we left the glade. It isn't possible for him to have hung on so long—not possible."

"And if he's let go?"

"If he has done that, why, then, he's dead."

"But are you sure the noose would close upon his neck? You, Bill Buck, and Alf Brandon, it was you two that arranged it."

"Bah! rejoins Buck; "you seed that same as we. It's bound to tighten when he drops. Of course we didn't mean that; and who'd a thought o' a bar runnin' straight into us in that way? Darn it, if the nigger has dropped, he's dead by this time, and there's an end of it. There's no help for it now."

"What's to be done, boys?" asks Grubbs. "There'll be an ugly account to settle, I reckon."

There is no answer to this question or remark.

In the faces of all there is an expression of strange significance. It is less repentance for the act than fear for the consequences. Some of the younger and less reckless of the party show some slight signs of sorrow, but among all fear is the predominant feeling.

"What's to be done, boys?" again asks Grubbs.

"We must do something. It won't do to leave things as they are."

"Hadn't we better ride back?" suggests Spence."

"Thar's no use goin' now," answers the son of the horse-dealer. "That is, for the savin' of him. If nobody else has been thar since we left, why then the nigger's dead--dead as pale Cesar."

"Do you think any one might have come along in time to save him?"

This question is asked with an eagerness in which all are sharers. They would be rejoiced to think it could be answered in the affirmative.

"There might," replies Randall, catching at the slight straw of hope. "The trace runs through the glade, right past the spot. A good many people go that way. Some one might have come along in time. At all events, we should go back and see. It can't make things any worse."

"Yes; we had better go back," assents the son of the planter; and then to strengthen the purpose, "we'd better go for *another purpose*."

"What, Alf?" ask several.

"That's easily answered. If the Indian's hung himself, we can't help it."

"You'll make it appear suicide? You forget that we tied his left arm. It would never look like it. He couldn't have done that himself."

"I don't mean that," continues Brandon.

"What, then?"

"If he's hanged, he's hanged and dead before this. We didn't hang him, or didn't intend it. That's clear."

"I don't think the law can touch us," suggests the son of the judge.

"But it may give us *trouble*, and that must be avoided."

"How do you propose to do, Alf?"

"It's an old story that dead men tell no tales, and buried ones less."

"Thar's a good grist o' truth in that," interpolates Buck.

"The suicide wouldn't stand. Not likely to. The cord might be cut away from the wrist; but then there's Rook's daughter, She saw him stop with us, and to find him swinging by the neck only half-an-hour after would be but poor proof of his having committed self-murder. No, boys, he must be put clean out of sight."

"That's right; that's the only safe way," cried all the others.

"Come on, then. We musn't lose a minute about it. The girl may come back to see what's keeping him, or old Rook, himself, may be straying that way, or somebody else travelling along the trace. Come on."

"Stay," exclaimed Randall. "There's something yet

—something that should be done before any chance separates us.”

“What is it?”

“We’re all alike in this ugly business—in the same boat. It don’t matter who contrived it, or who fixed the rope. We all agreed to it. Is that not so?”

“Yes, all. I for one acknowledge it.”

“And I!”

“And I!”

All six give their assent, showing at least loyalty to one another.

“Well, then,” continues Randall, “we must be true to each other. We must swear it, and now, before going further. I propose we all take an oath.”

“We’ll do that. You, Randall, you repeat it over, and we’ll follow you.”

“Head your horses round, then, face to face.”

The horses are drawn into a circle, their heads together, with muzzles almost touching.

Randall proceeds, the rest repeating after him.

“We swear, each and every one of us, never to make known by act, word, or deed, the way in which the half-breed Indian, called Choc, came by his death, and we mutually promise never to divulge the circumstances connected with that affair, even if called upon in a court of law; and, finally, we swear to be true to each other in keeping this promise until death.”

"Now," says Brandon, as soon as the six young scoundrels have shaken hands over their abominable compact, "let us on, and put the Indian out of sight. I know a pool close by, deep enough to drown him. If he do get discovered, that will look better than hanging."

There is no reply to this astute proposal; and though it helps to allay their apprehensions, they advance in solemn silence towards the scene of their deserted bivouac.

There is not one of them who does not dread to go back in that glade, so lately gay with their rude roystering; not one who would not give the horse he is riding and the gun he carries in his hand, never to have entered it.

But the dark deed has been done, and another must needs be accomplished to conceal it.

CHAPTER IX.

A COMPULSORY COMPACT.

HEAVY with apprehension, rather than remorse for their crime, the six hunters ride on towards the clearing.

They avoid the travelled track, lest they may meet some one upon it, and approach through the thick timber.

Guiding their horses, so as to make the least noise, and keeping the hounds in check, they advance slowly and with caution.

Some of the less courageous are reluctant to proceed, fearing the spectacle that is before them.

Even the loud-talking Slaughter would gladly give up the newly-conceived design, but for the manifest danger of leaving it undone.

Near the edge of the opening, still screened from their view by the interposing trunks and cane-culms, they again halt, and hold council—this time speaking in whispers.

"We should not all go forward," suggests the son of the tavern-keeper. "Better only one or two at first, to see how the land lies."

"That would be better," chimes in Spence.

"Who'll go, then?"

Buck and Brandon are pointed out by the eyes of the others resting upon them. These two have been leaders throughout the whole affair. Without showing poltroon, they cannot hang back now.

They volunteer for the duty, but not without show of reluctance. It is anything but agreeable.

"Let's leave our horses. We'll be better without them. If there's any one on the ground, we can steal back without being seen."

It is the young planter's proposition, and Buck consents to it.

They slip out of their saddles, pass the bridles to two of those who stay behind, and then, like a couple of cougars stealing upon the unsuspecting fawn, silently make their way through the underwood.

The clearing is soon under their eyes, with all it contains.

There is the carcase of the bear, black with buzzards, and the skin still hanging from the tree.

But the object of horror they expected to see hanging upon another tree is not there. That sight is spared them.

There is no body on the branch, no corpse underneath it. Living or dead, the Indian is gone.

His absence is far from re-assuring them; the more so as, on scanning the branch, they perceive, still sus-

pended from it, a piece of the rope they had so adroitly set to ensnare him.

Even across the glade they can see that it has been severed with the clean cut of a knife, instead of, as they could have wished, given way under its weight.

Who could have cut the rope? Himself? Impossible! Where was the hand to have done it? He had none to spare for such a purpose. Happy for them to have thought that he had.

They skulk around the glade to get nearer, still going by stealth, and in silence. The buzzards perceive them, and though dull birds, reluctant to leave their foul feast, they fly up with a fright. Something in the air of the two stalkers seemed to startle them, as if they too knew them to have been guilty of a crime.

"Yes, the rope's been cut, that's sartin," says Buck, as they stand under it. "A clean wheep o' a knife blade. Who the divvel cud a done it?"

"I can't think," answers the young planter, reflecting. "As like es not old Jerry Rook, or it might have been a stray traveller."

"Whoever it was, I hope the cuss came in time; if not——"

"If not, we're in for it. Bless'd if I wouldn't liked it better to've found him hanging; there might have been some chance of hiding him out of the way. But now, if

he's been dropped upon dead, we're done for. Whoever found him will know all about it. Lena Rook knew we were here, and her sweet lips can't be shut, I suppose. If 't had been only Rook himself, the old scoundrel, there might have been a chance. Money would go a long ways with him ; and I'm prepared—so would we all be—to buy his silence."

"Lucky you riddy for that, Mister Alfred Brandon. That's jest what Rook, 'the old scoundrel,' wants, and jess the very thing he means to insist upon hevin'. Now name your price."

If a dead body had dropped down from the branch above them it could not have startled the two culprits more than did the living form of Jerry Rook, as it came gliding out of the thick cane close by the stem of the tree.

"You, Jerry Rook !" exclaim both together, and in a tone that came trembling through their teeth. "You here?"

"I'm hyar, gentlemen ; an' jess in time, seeing as ye wanted me. Now, name yur price ; or, shall I fix it for ye ? 'Tain't no use 'fectin' innercence o' what I mean ; ye both know cleer enuf, an' so do this chile, all 'beout it. Ye've hanged young Pierre Robideau, as lived with me at my shanty."

"We did not.",

"Ye did ; hanged him by the neck till he war dead, as

the judges say. I kim hyar by chance, an' cut him down; but not till 'twar too late."

"Is that true, Rook? Are you speaking the truth? Did you find him dead?"

"Dead as a buck arter gittin' a bullet from Jerry Rook's rifle. If ye don't b'lieve it, maybe you'd step down to my shanty, and see him streeched out."

"No, no. But we didn't do it; we didn't intend it, by Heaven!"

"No swarin', young fellars. I don't care what your intentions war; ye've done the deed. I seed how it war, and all abeout it; ye hung him up for sport—pretty sport that war—an' ye rud off, forgittin' all abeout him. Yur sport hev been his death."

"My God! we are sorry to hear it. We had no thought of such a thing. A bear came along, and set the hounds up."

"Oh, a bar, war it? I thort so. An' ye tuk arter the bar, and let the poor young fellar swing?"

"It is true; we can't deny it. We had no intention of what has happened; we thought only of the bear."

"Wal, now, ye'll have to think o' something else. What d'ye intend doin'?"

"It's a terrible ugly affair. We're very sorry."

"No doubt ye air, an' ye'd be a precious sight sorrier of the young fellar had any kinfolk to look arter it, and call ye to account. As it be, there ain't nobody but

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me—and he warn't no kin o' mine—only a stayin' wi' me, that may make it eazier for you."

"But, what have you done with—the—the body?"

Brandon asks the question hesitatingly, and thinking of Rook's daughter.

"The body? Wal, I've carried it to the shanty, an' put it out o' sight. I didn't want the hul country to be on fire till I'd fust seed ye. As yet, thar ain't nobody the wiser."

"And——"

"An' what?"

"Your daughter."

"Oh! my darter don't count. She air a 'bedient gurl, and ain't gwine to blabbin' while I put the stopper on her tongue. Don't ye be skeeart 'beout thet."

"Jerry Rook!" says Brandon, recovering confidence from the old hunter's hints, "it's no use being basket-faced over this business. We've got into a scrape, and and we know it. You know it, too. We had no intention to commit a crime; it was all a lark; but since it's turned out ugly, we must make the best we can of it. You're the only one who can make it disagreeable for us, and you won't. I know you won't. We're willing to behave handsomely if you act otherwise. You can say this young fellow has gone away—down to Orleans, or anywhere else. I've heard you once say he was not to be with you much longer. That will explain to your

neighbours why he is missing. To be plain, then, what is the price of such an explanation?"

"Durn me, Alf Brandon, ef you oughtn't to be a lawyer, or something o' thet sort. You hit it so adzactly. Wal; let's see! I risk someat by keepin' your secret—a good someat. I'll stand a chance o' bein' tuk up for aidin' an' abettin'. Wal; let's see! Thar war six o' ye. My girl tolt me so, an' I kin see it by the tracks o' your critters. Whar's the other four?"

"Not far off."

"Wal; ye'd better bring 'em all up hyar. I s'pose they're all's deep in the mud as you in the mire. Besides, it air too important a peint to be settled by depity. I'd like all o' yur lot to be on the groun' an' jedge for theerselves."

"Agreed; they shall come. Bring them up, Bill."

Bill does as directed, and the six young hunters are once more assembled in the glade; but with very different feelings from those stirring them when there before.

Bill has told them all, even to the proposal made by Rook; and they sit upon their horses downcast, ready to consent to his terms.

"Six o' ye," says the hunter, apparently calculating the price of the silence to be imposed on him; "ail o' ye sons o' rich men, and all able to pay me a hundred dollars a-year for the term o' my nateral life. Six

hundred dollars. 'Tain't much to talk about; jess keep my old carcass from starvin'. Huntin's gone to the dogs 'bout hyar, an' you fellars hev hed somethin' to do in sendin' it thar. So on that account o' itself ye oughter be only too happy in purvidin' for one whose business ye've speiled. It air only by way o' a penshun. Hundred dollars apiece, and that reg'larly paid *pre-annum*. Ye all know what 'tis for. Do ye consent?"

"I do."

"And I."

"And I."

And so signify the six.

"Wal, then, ye may go hum; ye'll hear no more 'bout this bizness from me, 'ceptin' any o' ye shed be sech a dodrotted fool as ter fall behind wi' yur payments. Ef ye do, by the Eternal——"

"You needn't, Jerry Rook," interposes Brandon, to avoid hearing the threat; "you may depend upon us. I shall myself be responsible for all."

"Enuf sed. Abeout this bar skin hanging on the tree. I 'spose ye don't want to take that wi' ye? I may take it, may I, by way o' earnest to the bargain?"

No one opposes the request. The old hunter is made welcome to the spoils of the chase, both those on the spot and in the forest further off.

They who obtained them are but too glad to surrender

every souvenir that may remind them of that ill-spent day.

Slow, and with bitter thoughts, they ride off, each to return to his own home, leaving Jerry Rook alone to chuckle over the accursed compact.

And this does he to his satisfaction.

"Now!" cries he, sweeping the bear's skin from the branch, and striding off along the trace; "now to make things squar wi' Dick Tarleton. Ef I ken do thet, I'll sot this day down in the kullinder as bein' the luckiest o' my life."

The sound of human voices has ceased in the glade. There is heard only the "whish" of wings as the buzzards return to their interrupted repast.

CHAPTER X.

VOWS OF VENGEANCE.

THE sun is down, and there is deep darkness over the firmament; deeper under the shadows of the forest. But for the gleam of the lightning bugs, the forms of two men standing under the trees could scarce be distinguished.

By such fickle light it is impossible to read their features, but by their voices may they be recognised, engaged as they are in an earnest conversation.

They are Jerry Rook and Dick Tarleton.

The scene is on the bank of the sluggish stream or *bayou*, that runs past the dwelling of the hunter, and not twenty yards from the shanty itself. Out of this they have just stepped apparently for the purpose of carrying on their conversation beyond ear-shot of any one.

The faint light burning within the cabin, that part of it that serves as sitting-room and kitchen, is from the fire. But there is no one there; no living thing save the hound slumbering upon the hearth.

A still duller light from a dip candle shows through the slits of a shut door, communicating with an inner

apartment. One gazing in might see the silhouette of a young girl seated by the side of a low bedstead, on which lies stretched the form of a youth apparently asleep. At all events, he stirs not, and the girl regards him in silence. There is just enough light to show that her looks are full of anxiety or sadness, but not sufficient to reveal which of the two, or whether both.

The two men outside have stopped by the stem of a large cottonwood, and are but continuing a dialogue commenced by the kitchen fire, that had been kindled but for the cooking of the evening meal, now eaten. It is still warm autumn weather, and the bears have not begun to hibernate.

"I tell ye, Dick," says the old hunter, whose turn it is to speak, "for you to talk o' revenge an' that sort o' thing air the darndest kind o' nonsense. Take it afore the coort ideed! What good 'ud thet do yè? They'd be the coort, an' the jedges; that is, thar fathers wud, an' ye'd stan' as much chance o' gettin' jestic out o' 'em as ye wud o' lightin' yur pipe at one o' them thar fire-bugs. They've got the money an' the infloence, an' thar's no law in these parts, 'ithout one or the t'other."

"I know it—I know it," says Tarleton, with bitter emphasis.

"I reckon ye've reezun to know it, Dick, now you haven't the money to spare for sech purposes, an', therefore, on thet score 'ud stan' no chance. Besides

thar's the old charge agin ye, and ye dasent appear to parsecute. It's the same men ye see, or the sons o' the same——"

"Curse them! The very same. Buck, Brandon, Randall—every one of them. Oh, God! There is destiny in it! 'Twas their fathers who ruined me, blighted my whole life, and now the sons to have done this. Strange—fearfully strange!"

"Wal, it air kewrious, I admit, an' do look as ef the devvil hed a hand in't. But he's playin' agen ye, Dick, yet, an' he'd beat ye sure, ef ye try to fout agin him. Take the device I've gin ye, an' git out o' his and thar way as fur's ye kin. Kaliforny's a good way off. Go thar as ye intended. Git rich if ye kin, an' ye think ye hev a chance. Do that, and then kum back hyar ef ye like. When yur pockets are well filled wi' them thar shinin' pebbles, ye kin command the law as ye like, and hev as much o' it as ye've a mind to."

"I shall have it for my own wrongs, or for his."

"Wal, I reck'n you hev reezun both ways. They used *you* durn'd ill. Thar's no doubt o' that. Still, Dick, ye must acknowledge that appearances war dreadfully agin' ye."

"Against me—perdition! From the way you say that, Jerry Rook, I might fancy that you too believed it. If I thought you did——"

"But I didn't, an' don't, ne'er a bit o' it, Dick. I know you war innercent o' *thet*."

"Jerry Rook, I have sworn to you, and swear it again, that I am as innocent of that girl's murder as if I had never seen her. I acknowledge that she used to meet me in the woods, and on the spot where she was found with a bullet through her heart, and my own pistol lying empty beside her. The pistol was stolen from my house by him who did the deed. It was one of the two men; which, I could never tell. It was either Buck or Brandon, the fathers of those fellows who have been figuring to-day. Like father, like son! Both were mad after the girl, and jealous of me. They knew I had outshined them, and that was no doubt their reason for destroying her. One or other did it, and if I'd known which, I'd have sent him after her long ago. I didn't wish to kill the wrong man, and to say the truth, the girl was nothing to me. But after what's happened to-day, I'll have satisfaction on them and their sons too—aye, every one who has had a hand in this day's work!"

"Wal, wal; but let it stan' over till ye kum back from Kaliforny. I tell, ye, Dick, ye kin do nuthin' now, 'ceptin' to git yur neck into a runnin' rope. The old lot are as bitter agin you now as they war that day when they had ye stannin' under a branch, wi' the noose half tightened round your thrapple; and ef ye hadn't got out o' thar clutches, why, then thar'd a been

an end o't. Ef you war to show here agin, it wud be jest the same thing, an' no chance o' yur escapin' a second time. Therefar, go to Kaliforny. Gather as many o' them donicks, an' as much o' the dust as ye kin lay yur claws on. Kum back, an' maybe then I mout do someat ter 'sist ye to the satisfacshin ye speak o'."

Tarleton stands silent, seeming to reflect. Strange that in all he has said, there is no tone of sorrow—only anger. The grief he should feel for his lost son—where is it?

Has it passed away so soon? Or is it only kept under by the keener agony of revenge?

With some impatience, his counsellor continues:—

"I've gin you good reezuns for goin', an' if you don't take my device, Dick, you'll do a durned foolish thing. Cut for Kaliforny, an' get gold—gold fust, an' let the revenge kum arter."

"No," answers Tarleton, with an emphasis telling of fixed determination. "The reverse, Jerry Rook, the reverse. For me, the revenge first, and then California! I'm determined to have satisfaction; and, if the law won't give it——"

"It won't, Dick, it won't."

"Then, this will."

There is just light enough from the fire-flies to show Jerry Rook the white ivory handle of a large knife, of

the sort quaintly called Arkansas toothpick, held up for a moment in Tarleton's hand.

But there is not enough to show Tarleton the dark cloud of disappointment passing over the face of the old hunter, as he perceives by that exhibition that his counsel had been spoken to no purpose.

"And now," said the guest, straightening himself up as if about to make his departure, "I've business that takes me to Helena. I expect to meet that fellow I've been telling you of who gave me the gold. He's to come there by an up-river boat, and should be there now. As you know, I've to do my travelling between two days. You may expect me back before sunrise. I hope you won't be disturbed by my early coming?"

"Come an' go when you like, Dick. Thar ain't much saramony 'beout my shanty. All hours air the same to me."

Tarleton buttons up his coat, in the breast of which is concealed the before-mentioned tooth-pick, and, without saying another word, strikes off for the road leading towards the river and the town of Helena. It is but little better than a bridle trace; and he is soon lost to sight under the shadows of its overhanging trees.

Jerry Rook keeps his place, standing close to the trunk of the cottonwood. When his guest has gone beyond reach of hearing, an exclamation escapes through his half-shut teeth, expressive of bitter chagrin.

CHAPTER XI.

DICK TARLETON.

In the conversation recorded Dick Tarleton has thrown some light on his own history. Not much more is needed to elucidate the statement made by him—that he must do his travelling *between two days*. He has admitted almost enough to serve the purposes of our tale which refers only to him, though a few more words, to fill up the sketch, may not be out of place.

Richard Tarleton was, in early life, one of those wild spirits by no means uncommon along the frontier line of civilization. By birth and breeding a gentleman; idleness, combined with evil inclinations had led him into evil ways, and these, in their turn, had brought him to beggary. Too proud to beg, and too lazy to enter upon any industrious calling, he had sought to earn his living by cards and other courses equally disreputable.

Vicksburg and other towns along the Lower Mississippi furnished him with many victims, till, at length, he made a final settlement in the state of Arkansas, at that time only a territory, and, as such,

the safest refuge for all characters of a similar kind. The town of Helena became his head-quarters.

In this grand emporium of scamps and speculators there was nothing in Dick Tarleton's profession to make him conspicuous. Had he confined himself to card-playing, he might have passed muster among the most respectable citizens of the place or its proximity, many of whom, like himself, were professed "sportsmen." But, Dick was not long in Helena until he began to be suspected of certain specialities of sport, among others, that of *nigger-running*. Long absences unaccounted for, strange company in which he was seen in strange places—both the company and the places already suspected—with, at times, a plentiful supply of money drawn from unknown sources, at length fixed upon Dick Tarleton a stigma of a still darker kind than that of card-playing or even sharpening. It became the belief that he was a *negro-stealer*, a crime unpardonable in all parts of planter-land—Arkansas not excepted.

Along with this belief, every other stigma that might become connected with his name was deemed credible, and no one would have doubted Dick Tarleton's capability of committing whatever atrocity might be charged to him.

Bad as he was, he was not so bad as represented and believed. A professed "sportsman," of wild and reckless habits, he knew no limits to dissipation and common

indulgence. Immoral to an extreme degree, it was never proved that he was guilty of those dark crimes with which he stood charged or suspected; and the suspicions, when probed to the bottom, were generally found to be baseless.

There were few, however, who took this trouble, for from the first Dick Tarleton was far from being a favourite among the fellows who surrounded him. He was of haughty habits, presuming on the superiority of birth and education, and—something still less easily tolerated—a handsome personal appearance. One of the finest looking men to be seen among the settlements, he was, it need hardly be said, popular among the fair sex—such of them as might be expected to turn their eyes upon a *sportsman*.

One of this class—a young girl of exceeding attraction, but, alas! with tarnished reputation—was at the time an inhabitant of Helena. Among her admirers, secret and open, were many young men of the place and of the adjacent plantations. She could count a long list of conquests, numbering names far above her own rank and station in life. Among those were Planter Brandon, the lawyer Randall, and, of lesser note, the horse dealer, Buck. None of these, however, appeared to have been successful in obtaining her smiles, which, according to general belief, were showered on the dissolute but handsome Dick Tarleton.

However it might have gratified the gambler's vanity, it did not add to his popularity. On the contrary, it increased the spite felt for him, and caused the dark suspicions to be oftener repeated.

Such were the circumstances preceding a terrible tragedy that one day startled Helena out of its ordinary tranquility. The young girl in question was found in the woods, at no great distance from the town, in the condition already stated by Dick Tarleton, murdered, and Dick himself was charged with being the murderer.

He was at once arrested and arraigned, not before a regular court of justice, but one constituted under a tree, and under the presidency of Judge Lynch. It was done in all haste, both the arrest and the trial, and equally quick was the condemnation. The case was so clear. His pistol, the very weapon that had sent the fatal bullet, in the hurry and confusion of escape, was let fall upon the ground close by the side of the victim. His relation with the unfortunate girl—some speech he had been heard boastingly to utter—a suspected disagreement arising from it—all pointed to Dick Tarleton as the assassin; and by a unanimous verdict of his excited judges, prompted by extreme vindictiveness, he was sentenced to hanging upon a tree.

In five minutes more he would have been consigned to this improvised gallows, but for the negligence of his executioners. In their blind fury they had but slightly

fastened his hands, while they had forgotten to strip him of his coat. In the pocket of this there chanced to be another pistol—the fellow of that found. Its owner remembered it, and, in the hour of his despair, determined upon an attempt to escape. Wrestling his wrists free from their fastening, he drew the pistol, discharged it in the face of the man who stood most in his way, and then clearing a track, sprang off into the woods!

The sudden surprise, the dismay caused by the death of the man shot at—for he fell dead in his track—held the others for some time as if spell-bound. When the pursuit commenced Dick Tarleton was out of sight, and neither Judge Lynch nor his jury ever set eyes upon him again.

The woods were scoured all round, and the roads travelled for days by parties sent in search of him. But all returned without reporting Dick Tarleton, or any traces of him.

It was thought that some one must have assisted him in his escape, and suspicion was directed upon a hunter named Rook, who squatted near White River—the Jerry Rook of our tale. But no proof could be obtained of this, and the hunter was left unmolested, though with some additional stain on a character before not reputed very clean.

Such is a brief sketch of the life of Richard Tarleton—that portion of it spent on the north-eastern corner

of Arkansas. No wonder, with such a record, he felt constrained to do his travelling by night.

Since that fearful episode, now a long time ago, he had not appeared at Helena or the settlements around—at least not to the eyes of those who would care to betray him. Gone to Texas was the general belief—Texas or some other lawless land, where such crimes are easily condoned. So spoke the “Puritans” of Arkansas, blind to their own especial blemish.

Even Jerry Rook knew not the whereabouts of his old acquaintance, until some six years before, when he had come to his cabin under the shadows of the night, bringing with him a boy whom he hinted at as being his son, the youth who had that day afforded such fatal sport for his atrocious tormentors.

The link between the two men could not have been strong, for the hunter, in taking charge of the boy had stipulated for his “keep,” and once or twice, during the long absence of his father, had shown a disposition to turn him out of doors. Still more so of late; and doubly more when Lena showed signs of interference in his favour. Ever, while regarding his daughter, he seemed to dread the presence of Pierre Robideau, as if the youth stood between him and some favourite scheme he had formed for her future.

There need be nothing to fear now—surely not; if Dick Tarleton would but discharge the debt.

Ah! to suppose this would be to make the grandest of mistakes. The brain of Jerry Rook was at that moment busy revolving more schemes than one. But there was one, grand as it was, dire and deadly.

Let our next chapter reveal it.

CHAPTER XII.

A TRAITOR'S EPISTLE.

As already chronicled, Dick Tarleton has started along the forest path, leaving Jerry Rook under the cotton-wood tree.

For some time he remains there, motionless as the trunk beside him.

The exclamation of chagrin that escaped him, as the other passed beyond earshot, is followed by words of a more definite shape and meaning. It was Dick Tarleton who drew from him the former. It is to him the latter are addressed, though without the intention of their being heard.

"Ye durned fool! ye'd speil my plan, wud ye? An' I 'spose all the same if I war to tell ye o't? But I ain't gwine to do that, nor to hev it speiled neyther by sich a

obs'nate eedgut as you. Six hundred dollars pre annu' air too much o' a good pull to be let go agin slack as that. An' dog-goned if I do let it go, cost what it may to keep holt o't. Yes, *cost what it may!*"

The phrase repeated with increased emphasis, along with a sudden change in the attitude of the speaker, shows some sinister determination.

"Dick," he continued, forsaking the apostrophic form, "air a fool in this bizness; a dod-rotted, pursumptuous saphead. *He* git satisfakshun out o' that lot, eyther by the law or otherways! They'd swing him up as soon as seed; an' he'd be seed afore he ked harm 'ere a one o' them. Then tha don't go 'beout 'ithout toatin' thar knives and pistols 'long wi' them, any more'n he. An' they'll be jest as riddy to use 'em. Ef 't kim to thet, what then? In coorse the hole thing 'ud leak out, an' whar'd this chile be 'beout his six hundred dollars?" Durn Dick Tarleton! Jest for the sake o' a silly revenge he'd be a speiln' all, leavin' me as I've been all my life, poor as he's turkey gobbler.

"It must be preevented, it must!"

"How air the thing to be done? Le's see.

"Thar's one way I knows o', that appear to be eezy enuf.

"Dick has goed to the town, an's boun' to kum back agin *from* the town. That's no reeson why he shed kum back hyar. Thar's nobody to miss him! The gurl

won't know he ain't gone for good. He's boun' to kum back afore mornin', an' afore thar's sunlight showin' among the trees. He'll be sartin' to kum along the trace, knowing thar's not much danger o' meetin' anybody, or bein' reco'nised in the dark. Why shedn't I meet him?"

With this interrogatory, a fiendish expression, though unseen by human eye, passes over the face of the old hunter. A fiendish thought has sprung up in his heart.

"Why shedn't 'I?" he pursues, reiterating the reflection. "What air Dick Tarleton to me? I haint no particklar spite agin him, thet is ef he'll do what I've devised him to dp. But ef he won't, ef he won't

"An' he won't. He's sed so, he's swore it.

"What, then! Am I to lose six hundred dollars pre annum, jess for the satisfakshun o' his spite? Durned ef I do, cost what it may.

"The thing'd be as eezy es tumbling off o' a log. A half-an-hour's squatting among the bushes beside that ere glead, the pullin' o' a trigger, an' it air done. Thar mout be a leetle bit o' haulin' an' hidin', but I kin eezy do the fust, and the Crik 'll do the last. I know a pool close by, thet's just the very place for sech a kinceel-mint.

"Who'd iver sispect? Thar's nobody to know; neery

soul but myself, an' I reck'n that ere secret 'ud be safe enuf in this coon's keepin'."

For some time the old hunter stands silent, as if further reflecting on the dark scheme, and calculating the chances of success or discovery.

All at once an exclamation escapes him that betokens a change of mind. Not that he has repented of his hellish design, only that some other plan promises better for its execution.

"Jerry Rook, Jerry Rook!" he mutters in apostrophe to himself, "what the stewpid hae ye been thinking o'. Ye've never yit spilt hewmin blood, an' mustn't begin that game now. It mout lie like a log upon yur soul, and besides, it's jest possible that somebody mout get to hear o't. The crack o' a rifle air a sespishous soun' at any time, but more espeeshully i' the dead o' night, if thar should chance tu be the howl of a wounded man comin' arter it. Sposin he, that air Dick, warn't shot dead at fust go. Durned ef I'd like to foller it up; neery bit o't. As things stan' thar need be no sech chances, eyther o' fearin' or failin'. A word to Planter Brandon 'll be as good as six shots out o' the surest rifle. It's only to let him know Dick Tarleton's hyar, an' a direckshun beouts whar he kin be foun'. He'll soon summons the other to 'sist him in that same bizness they left unfinished, now, God knows how miny yeer ago. They'll make short work wi' him. No danger o'

thar givin' him time to palaver beout *thet* or anythin' else, I reckon ; an' no danger to *me*. A hint'll be enuf, 'ithout my appearin' among 'em. The very plan, by the Eternal!"

"How's best for the hint ter be konvayed to 'em? Ha! I kin rite. Fort'nit I got skoolin' enuf for thet. I'll write to Planter Brandon. Tha gurl kin take it over to the plantation. She needn't be know'd eyther. She kin rop up in hur cloke, and gi'e it ter sum o' the niggers, as'll sure ter be 'beout the place outside. Thar's no need for a answer. I know what Brandon 'll do arter gittin' it.

"Thar's no time to be squandered away. By this, Dick hes got ter the town. Thar's no tellin' how long he may stay thar, an' they must intrap him on his way back. They kin be a waitin' an' riddy, in that bit o' clearin'. The very place for the purpis, considerin' it's been tried arready.

"No, thar arn't a minnit to be lost. I must inter the shanty, an' scrape off the letter."

Bent upon his devilish design, he hastens inside the house ; as he enters, calling upon his daughter to come into the kitchen.

"Hyar gurl. Ye've got some paper ye rite yur lessons upon. Fetch me a sheet o't, along wi' a pen an' ink. Be quick 'bout it:"

The young girl wonders what he can want with things

so rarely used by him, but she is not accustomed to question him, and without saying a word, complies with the requisition.

The pen, inkstand, and paper, are placed on the rude slab table, and Jerry Rook sits down before it, taking the pen between his fingers.

After a few moments spent in silent cogitation, reflecting on the form of his epistle, it is produced.

Badly spelt, and rudely scrawled, but short and simple, it runs thus :—

“TO PLANTER BRANDIN, ESQUIRE.

“Sir,—I guess as how ye recollex a man, by name, Dick Tarleton; an' maybe ye mout be desireous o' seein' him. Ef ye be, ye kin gratify yur desire. He air now, at this present moment, in the town o' Helena, tho' what part o' it I don't know. But I know whar he will be afore mornin'. That air upon the road leadin' from the town t'ward tha settlements on White River. He arn't a gwine fur out, as he's travellin' afoot, and he's sartin to keep the trace through the bit o' clearin' not fur from Caney Crik. Ef you or anybody else wants ter see him, that wud be as good a place as thar is on the road.

“Y'urs at command,

“A STRENGER BUT A FREN'.”

Jerry Rook has no fear of his handwriting being recognised. So long since he has seen it, he would scarce know it himself.

Folding up the sheet, and sealing it with some drops of resin, melted in the dull flame of the dip, he directs it as inside—“To Planter Brandin, Esquire.

Then handing it to his daughter, and instructing the young girl how to deliver it *incog.*, he despatches her upon her errand.

Lena, with her cloak folded closely around her fairy form, and hooded over her head, proceeds along the path leading to the Brandon plantation. Poor, simple child, herself innocent as the forest fawn, she knows not that she is carrying in her hand the death-warrant of one, who, although but little known, should yet be dear to her — Dick Tarleton, the father of Pierre Robideau.

She succeeds in delivering the letter, though failing to preserve her incognito. The hooded-head proved but a poor disguise. The domestic who takes the epistle out of her hand recognises, by the white outstretched arm and slender symmetrical fingers, the daughter of "old Rook, de hunter dat live 'pon Caney Crik." So reports he to his master, when questioned about the messenger who brought the anonymous epistle.

Known or unknown, the name is of slight significance; the withholding of it does not affect the action intended by the writer, nor frustrate the cruel scheme. As the morning sun strikes into the "bit o' clearin'," described in Jerry Rook's letter, it throws light upon a terrible tableau—the body of a man suspended from the branch of a tree.

It is upon the same branch where late hung the young hunter Robideau. *It is the body of his father.*

There is no one near — no sign of life, save the buzzards still lingering around the bones of the bear, and the quaint, grey wolf that has shared with them their repast. But there are footmarks of many men — long scores across the turf, that tell of violent struggling, and a patch of grass more smoothly trampled down beneath the gallows tree. There stood Judge Lynch, surrounded by his jury and staff of executioners, while above him swung the victim of their vengeance.

Once more had the travestie of a trial been enacted ; once more condemnation pronounced ; and that tragedy, long postponed, was now played to the closing scene, the *dénouement* of death !

CHAPTER XIII.

SIX YEARS AFTER.

Six years have elapsed since the lynching of Dick Tarletcn. Six years, by the statute of limitations, will wipe cut a pecuniary debt, and make dim many a reminiscence. But there are remembrances not so

easily effaced; and one of these was the tragedy enacted in the Clearing, near the Caney Creek.

And yet it was but little remembered. In a land, where every-day life chronicles some lawless deed, the mere murder of a man is but a slight circumstance, scarce extending to the proverbial "nine days' wonder."

Richard Tarleton was but a "sportsman," a gambler, if not more; and, as to the mode of his execution, several others of the same fraternity were treated in like fashion not long after, having been hanged in the streets of Vicksburg, the most respectable citizens of the place acting as their executioners!

Amidst these, and other like reminiscences, the circumstance of Dick Tarleton's death soon ceased to be talked about, or even thought of, except, perhaps, by certain individuals who had played a part in the illegal execution.

But some of these were dead, some gone away from the neighbourhood; while the influx of colonising strangers, creating a thicker population in the place, had caused those changes that tend to destroy the souvenirs of earlier times, and obliterate the memories of many a local legend.

There was one memory that remained fresh — one souvenir that never slept in the minds of certain individuals who still lived in Helena or its neighbourhood. It was of another tragic occurrence that had taken

place in the clearing near Caney Creek, on the day before that on which the condemned gambler had been dispatched into eternity.

The knowledge of this second tragedy had been confided only to a few ; and beyond this few it had not extended. The disappearance of young Robideau, sudden as it had been, excited scarce any curiosity—less on account of the other and better known event that for the time occupied the attention of all.

The boy, as if feeling the taint of his Indian blood, and conscious of a distinction that in some way humiliated him, had never mixed much with the youth of the surrounding settlement, and for this reason his absence scarce elicited remark.

Those who chanced to make the inquiry were told that Jerry Rook had sent him back to his mother's people, who were half-breed Choctaw Indians, located beyond the western border of Arkansas territory, on lands lately assigned to them by a decree of the Congress.

The explanation was of course satisfactory ; and to most people in Helena and its neighbourhood the boy Robideau was as if he had never been.

There were some, however, who had better reason to remember him, as also to disbelieve this suspicious tale of Jerry Rook, though careful never to contradict it. These were the six youths, now grown to be men, the heroes of that wild, wicked frolic already recorded.

In their minds the remembrance of that fatal frolic was as vivid as ever, having been periodically refreshed by an annual disbursement of a hundred dollars each.

With the exacting spirit of a Shylock, Jerry Rook had continued to hold them to their contract; and if at any time remonstrance was made, it was soon silenced, by his pointing to an oblong mound of earth, rudely resembling a grave, under that tree where he had held his last conversation with *his friend*, Dick Tarleton.

The inference was that the remains of Pierre Robideau were deposited beneath that sod, and could at any time be disinterred to give damning evidence of his death.

Remonstrance was rarely made. Most of the contributors to Jerry Rook's income had become masters of their own substance. Still, the compulsory payment of a hundred dollars each was like the annual drawing of a tooth; all the more painful from the reflection of what it was for, and the knowledge as long as their creditor lived there was no chance of escaping it.

Painful as it was, however, they continued to pay it more punctually than they would have done had it been a debt recoverable by court, or an obligation of honour.

They were not all equally patient under the screw thus periodically put upon them. There were two more especially inclined to kick out of the terrible traces that chafed them. These were Bill Buck, the son of the horse-

dealer, and Slaughter, who kept the "Helena Tavern," his father being defunct.

Neither had greatly prospered in the world, and to both the sum of a hundred dollars a year was a tax worth considering.

In their conversations with one another, they had discussed this question, and more than once had been heard to hint at some dark design by which the impost might be removed.

These hints were only made in presence of their partners in the secret compact, and never within ear-shot of Jerry Rook.

It is true they were discouraged by the others less harassed by the tax, and, therefore, less tempted to take any sinister step towards removing it. They had enough to torment them already.

Both Buck and Slaughter were capable of committing crimes even deeper than that already on their conscience. Six years had not changed them for the better. On the contrary, they had become worse, both being distinguished as among the most dissolute members of the community.

A similar account might be given of the other four; though these, figuring in positions of greater respectability, kept their characters a little better disguised.

Two of their fathers were also dead—Randall, the judge, and Spence, the Episcopalian clergyman, while

their sons, less respected than they, were not likely to succeed to their places.

Brandon's father still lived, though drink was fast carrying him to the grave, and his son was congratulating himself on the proximity of an event that would make him sole master of himself as also of a cotton plantation.

The storekeeper, Grubbs, had gone, no one knew whither—not even the sheriff, loth to let him depart—leaving his son to build up a new fortune extracted out of the pockets of the Mississippi boatmen. The horse-dealer still stuck to his old courses—coping, swopping, swearing—likely to outlive them all.

Among the many changes observable in the settlements around Helena there was none more remarkable than that which had taken place in the fortunes of Jerry Rook. It was a complete transformation, alike mysterious, for no one could tell how it came, or whence the power that had produced it. It appeared not only in the person of Jerry himself, but in everything that appertained to him—his house, his grounds, his dogs, and his daughter; in short, all his belongings.

An old hunter no longer, clad in dirty buckskin, and dwelling in a hovel, but a respectable-looking citizen of the semi-planter type, habited in decent broad-cloth, wearing clean linen, living in a neat farm-house, surrounded by fenced fields, and kept by black domestics.

The old scarred dog was no longer to be seen ; but, in his place, some three or four hounds, lounging lazily about, and looking as if they had plenty to eat and nothing to do.

But, in the *personnel* of the establishment, there was, perhaps, no transformation more striking than that which had taken place in Jerry Rook's daughter. There was no change in her beauty ; that was still the same, only more womanly—more developed. But the sun-tanned, barefoot girl, in loose home-spun frock, with unkempt hair sweeping over her shoulders, was now, six years after, scarce recognizable in the young lady in white muslin dress, fine thread stockings, and tresses plaited, perfumed, and kept from straying by the teeth of a tortoiseshell comb.

And this was Lena Rook, lovely as ever, and more than ever the theme of man's admiration.

Despite all this, despite her father's prosperity, and the comfort, almost luxury, surrounding her, few failed to remark an expression of melancholy constantly pervading her countenance, though none could tell its cause.

Some dread souvenir must have become fixed in the mind of that young girl—some dark cloud had descended over her heart, perhaps, to shadow it for ever !

CHAPTER XIV.

STEALING UPON A SHANTY.

THE breath of autumn had blown over the woods of Arkansas, and the first frost of November, followed by the beautiful Indian summer, had imparted to the foliage those rich tints of red and gold known only to the forests of America.

The squirrel, down among the dead leaves, actively engaged in garnishing its winter store, scarce heeds the footstep of the hunter heard near by among the trees.

There is one making his way through the woods at no great distance from the dwelling of Jerry Rook. He was approaching from the west, with his face in the direction of the house. But although he carried a gun, and was not travelling upon either trace or path, he did not appear to be in pursuit of game.

Squirrels scampered off before him unmolested, and, once or twice, turkeys ran across his track without tempting him to draw trigger or even take the gun from his shoulder.

In appearance he would have scarce have passed for a hunter, nor was he dressed after this fashion. His costume was more that of a traveller. Moreover, he had

just come from a stand some three miles back, where he had left a horse and a pair of well-filled saddle-bags.

The "stand," a solitary tavern, was not far from the crossing of White River, on the road leading from Little Rock to the settlements on the Mississippi. He had approached the tavern from the west as if coming from the former, and now on foot he was still advancing eastward, though not along the road which ran through the forest at some distance to his right, screened from view by thick timber standing between.

By the dust still clinging to his garments, he appeared to have come a long way. It was gradually getting brushed off by the leaves of the underwood and the thick cane brakes through which he was compelled to pass.

Why was he avoiding the road? Was he a stranger who had taken the wrong fork that had conducted him to a blind trace now run out? No. It could not be that. The main road was not to be mistaken. Besides, he had left it at right angles after getting out of sight of the stand, and had since been keeping parallel to it as if acquainted with its direction. If a stranger, he was evidently one who had been over the ground before.

He had the appearance of being twenty-five years of age, with a complexion naturally dark, still further shaded either by exposure to a tropical sun or a protracted spell of travelling. His hair was jetty black and curly, his upper lip bearded, with a dark, well-

defined whisker on the cheek. The chin was clean shaven, showing a protrusion indicative of great firmness, while the profile was of true Roman type. His eyes were dark, lustrous, and piercing. In stature, he was full six feet, with a figure of fine proportions, knit as if for strength. Its activity was displayed by his light, lithe step, as he made his way through the tangle of trees.

As already stated, the dress was not that of a hunter, either amateur or professed. The coat was of broad-cloth, dark-coloured, and of good quality, cut frock-fashion. It was worn buttoned, though showing underneath a vest of Marsala, with striped shirt-bosom and sparkling breast-pin. The hat was of the kind known as grey felt. This, with the green-baize "wrappers" around the legs, showing the chafe of the stirrup-leather, gave the costume somewhat of the character of a traveller's.

The jaded horse and heavy saddle-bags, with a thick coating of dust over all, had told the tavern people as he reined up, of a long road left behind him—perhaps from the far prairies.

The keeper of the lone hostelry had thought it strange his starting off the moment his horse was stabled. But the horse and saddle-bags were earnest of his coming back; and Boniface had continued to chew his quid without being inquisitive.

As the young man threaded his way through the trees, it was evident he was not straying. His face was continually in one direction ; while his glance, directed forward, seemed to search for some object expected to appear before him.

All at once he made a stop, at sight of a break among the trees. It indicated a tract of open ground, or clearing, that extended athwart the path he was pursuing.

He seemed surprised at this, and glanced quickly to the right and left, as if to assure himself that he had been going right.

"Yes," he muttered, apparently satisfied on this head. "Right before me was the spot—the creek and the cabin. I can't be mistaken. These old trees I remember well—every one of them. But there's a clearing now—perhaps a plantation,—and the old shanty gone altogether."

Without finishing the reflection he kept onward, though slowly, and with greater caution, increasing as he drew nearer to the open ground. He appeared to approach it stealthily, step by step, as if stalking a herd of deer.

He was soon on the edge of the opening, though still under cover of thick woods.

A stream made the line of demarcation between them.

On its opposite side, about twenty yards from the bank, he saw a neat farm-house, with a spacious porch in front, and surrounded by fields. There were out-buildings at the back, with sheds and corn-cribs; while in front a fenced enclosure, half garden half orchard, extended down to the stream, which formed its bottom boundary.

Just opposite this enclosure the stranger had stopped, the moment he caught sight of the house.

"As I anticipated;" he muttered to himself. "Changed—everything changed!—the cabin cleared away, and the trees. Jerry Rook gone—perhaps dead. Some stranger in his place;—and she gone too—grown up—and—and—"

A choking sigh forbade the pronounciation of some word that struggled for utterance—the expression of some painful thought, made manifest by the dark shadow that swept across the countenance of the speaker.

"Oh! what an unfortunate fate. Fool that I was to go away and leave her. Fool to have listened to the counsels of her wicked father. When I learnt what he had done I should have come back, if not for love, for revenge. It may not be too late for the last; but, for the first—O God!—the girl I have loved for long years, to come back and find her—perhaps in the arms of another—O God!"

For some moments the young man stood with clouded face, his strong frame quivering under the shock of some painful emotion.

"Shall I cross over and make inquiry?" was the reflection that followed, as he became calmer.

"The people can, no doubt, give me some information, whether he be dead, and if she be still in the neighbourhood. No—no; I will not ask. I dread the answer to be given me.

"But, why not? I may as well know now the worst, whatever it be. I must learn it in time. Why not at once?

"There is no danger of my being recognised—even she would not know me, and these people are, perhaps, strange to the settlement. The country shows a change—clearings everywhere around, where I remember only trees. I wonder who they are? Some of them should soon come out by that door. The day is inviting; I shall hold back awhile and see."

During all this time the young man had been standing among thick underwood that screened his person from view.

He only changed position so that his face should be also invisible to any one upon the other side of the creek, and thus stood with eyes fixed intently upon the house.

He had not been many minutes in this attitude of

expectation, when the front door, which stood open, was filled by a form, the sight of which sent the blood in a lava current through his veins, and caused his heart to bound audibly in his breast.

The apparition that had produced this effect was a young girl—a lady she might be called—in light summer dress, with a white kerchief thrown loosely over her head, only partially concealing the thick coil of shining hair held by the tortoiseshell comb underneath it.

Standing on the step of the door, with the dark background behind her, she appeared like some fair portrait suddenly set in its frame.

Changed as she was since he had last seen her—a young girl in coarse, copperas-dyed gown of homespun stuff, bareheaded, stockingless and shoeless—he who stood among the trees might not so readily have recognized her had he met her elsewhere; but there, upon that spot where stood the old cabin, under whose roof he had lived and loved—loved her—recognition came at the first glance. He knew that the fair vision before him was Lena Rook, still living, still lovely as ever.

CHAPTER XV.

LENA'S RECOGNITION.

THE first impulse of the young man was to spring forth from his ambush, leap over the creek, a mere rivulet, and rush into the presence of the fair creature who had shown herself in the doorway.

He was restrained by a crowd of thoughts that came surging up at the moment—doubts and memories—both painful. Her father might be still alive and inside the house. The stranger had serious reasons for not wishing to see *him*. Or he might be dead and she now under the control of another!

The last thought was agonizing, and he gazed intently upon the girl as if searching for some sign that would release him from the torture of suspense. Scarce twenty yards from where she stood, he could see the sparkle of jewellery upon the fingers of her left hand. Did one of them carry that thin circlet of gold to show she was lost to him for ever?

His glance, instinctively directed to her hand, now traced the contour of her person, and once more mounted to her face. Form and features were alike scrutinised—the colour of her cheeks—the expression in her eyes—the air that pervaded all.

It was that of one still single, whose fresh virginal charms had not given place to the staid demeanour produced by the solitudes of wedded life. It pleased him to fancy so.

And she, too, noted the melancholy air, and wondered at its meaning.

There was much besides to wonder at in the changes that had taken place. How had Jerry Rook, a poor white, become a proprietor? He must be so if the house were his. And if not, then back again comes the painful thought that it, and she, too, might be the property of another.

What had he best do? Retire without showing himself, and seek information elsewhere—some one living near who could tell him all? Or he might learn what he wanted from the landlord of the tavern where he had stopped. Should he return to it and stay till circumstances favoured him with an *éclaircissement*?

Why not have it at once; and from her? Maid or married she would not be likely to remember him. A skin changed from the soft smoothness of boyhood's day—a complexion deeply bronzed—the downy cheek and lips now roughly bearded—stature increased by at least six inches, and a dress altogether different from that in which she had been accustomed to see him.

"No; she will not recognise me," muttered the young man, as he completed this self-examination. "I

will go round by the gate, make some excuse for a call ; get into conversation with her ; and then——”

He was about turning, to make the circuit unobserved, when he saw that she had stepped out of the porch, and was coming towards the creek. It was for this that the kerchief had been spread over her crown, as a shade against the sun.

He could not safely retreat without having his ambush discovered. He resolved to keep his place.

She came on down the walk, and turned in among the trees of the orchard. Most of them were peach trees, laden with their luscious fruit, now ripe and falling. The ground was strewed with these golden globes, affording food to the honey-bee and hornet.

She was now out of his sight, or seen only at intervals, her white dress gleaming through the leaves, as she moved through the orchard.

The young man was thinking how he might present himself without seeming rude, when, all at once, a cry came from the lips of the young lady. It was a short, sharp exclamation, apparently called forth by some impending danger. It seemed a sufficient apology for intruding.

Accepting it as such, the stranger sprang across the creek, and rushed direct to the orchard.

In a few seconds he stood confronting the girl, who had turned towards the house.

"I heard you cry out," he said; "was there any danger. May I ask——"

But, before he had finished the interrogatory, he saw what had elicited the exclamation.

A huge snake lay coiled under one of the trees!

It had been feasting on the fallen fruit, and, nearly trodden upon, had thrown itself into the defensive attitude.

The "skirr" caused by the vibration of its tail told it to be a rattle-snake.

Without inquiring further, the young man raised his rifle, and sent a bullet through its head. Its coils flew out, and, after struggling a few seconds on the grass the reptile lay dead.

"Thanks, sir," said the lady, as soon as she had recovered from her surprise. "I came near setting my foot upon it, and, perhaps, would have done so, if I'd not heard the rattle. You're a good shot, sir; you've killed it outright!"

"I've had a deal of practice, *Miss*," he replied, laying a marked emphasis on the last word.

His heart throbbed audibly, as he awaited the rejoinder. Would she accept the title, or correct it?

He had already glanced at her left hand, holding a peach she had plucked. There were rings; but among them he saw not the plain circlet nor its keeper. Their absence inspired him with hope.

"One can easily see that," she rejoined. "Besides, I am not unacquainted with the way of the woods. My father is a hunter, or was."

"You say *was*, *Miss*. Is your father still living?"

The question was asked with a double design. Would she still permit herself to be called "*Miss*?" Was Jerry Rook the owner of the pretty house that had supplanted his rude sheeling?

"My father living? Certainly, sir; but he does not go hunting any more—or only at times. He has enough to keep him occupied about home—clearing the ground and planting the crops."

"Is he at home now?"

"To-day, no. He has ridden over to Helena. I expect he will be back soon. Do you wish to see him, sir. You have some business, perhaps?"

"No, no. I was merely wandering through the woods, squirrel shooting. I had strayed to the other side of the creek, when I heard you cry."

"It was very kind of you to come to my assistance," said the young girl, giving to the stranger a glance, in which she did not fail to note his graceful bearing. Then, observing the dust upon his garments, she added, "If I mistake not, you're a stranger to this part of the country?"

"I once knew it well, especially around this place."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. If I remember right, there was a cabin here—upon the very spot on which your house is now standing. It was inhabited by an old hunter by the name of Rook—Jeremiah or Jerry Rook."

"That is my father's name."

"Then it must have been he. What a change! It was all standing timber around—scarce an acre of clearing."

"That is true. It is only lately that my father bought the land, and cleared it as you see. We are better off than we were then."

"Has your father any family besides yourself—a son, or *son-in-law*?"

"Not any, sir," replied the young girl, turning upon the questioner a look of some surprise; "I am the only one—his only daughter. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I remembered—or had heard—something——"

"Heard what, sir?" asked she, cutting short the stammering speech.

"Of a young man—a boy, rather—who lived in your father's cabin. Was he not your brother?"

"I never had one. He you speak of was no relative to us."

"There was some one, then?"

"Yes. He is gone away—gone years ago."

The serious tone in which these words were spoken—

something like a sigh that accompanied them, with a shadow that made its appearance on the countenance of the speaker—were signs pleasing to the interrogator. His heart beat joyfully as he put upon them his own interpretation.

Before he could question her further, the young girl, as if stirred by a sudden thought, looked inquiringly in his face.

"You say you knew this place well, sir? When did you leave it? Was it a long time ago?"

"Not so long either; but, alas! long enough for you to have forgotten me, Lena."

"Pierre, it is you!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ABSENCE EXPLAINED.

It was Pierre Robideau who stood once more in the presence of Lena Rook—not in her presence alone, for they were locked in each other's embrace.

From the first moment of seeing him, the young girl had felt strange thoughts stealing over her—weird memories, awakened by that manly presence that scarce seemed unknown to her.

She knew that Pierre Robideau still lived, and that her father had compelled her to keep it a secret. But why, she knew not, nor why her father had sent him away. It was well she knew not this.

Equally ignorant had she been kept as to where he had gone.

California, her father told her; and this was indeed true. But what knew she of California? Nothing beyond the fact of its being a far distant land, where people went to gather gold.

This much was known to every one in the settlements around—every one in America.

Lena Rook thought not of the gold. She thought only of her old playmate, and wondered why he was staying so long away.

Was he never going to return? He who had won the girl's heart—the firstlings of her young love—had stood under the forest tree, clasping her in his arms, and telling her she had won his!

And on that dread night, when he lay upon the couch, slowly recovering from the terrible strangulation, was not the first word breathed forth from his lips her own name—Lena?

And to have gone away, and staid away, and forgotten all this!

It was not strange she wondered, not strange she grieved — or that the cloud of melancholy, already

remarked upon, sat almost continually on her countenance.

She had not forgotten *him*—not for a single day. Throughout the long lonely years, there was scarce an hour in which she did not think, though not permitted to speak, of him. She had been true to him—both in heart and hand—true against scores of solicitations, including that of Alfred Brandon, who was now seeking her hand in marriage, determined upon obtaining it.

But she had resisted his suit—even braving the displeasure of her father who was backing it.

And all for the memory of one who had gone away, without explaining the cause of his departure, or making promise to return.

Often had she thought of this, and with bitterness—at times, too, with a feeling akin to spite.

But now with Pierre once more in her presence, his tall graceful form before her eyes, she instantly forgot all, and threw herself sobbing upon his breast.

There was no reservation in the act—no pretence of prudery. Lena's instinct told her he was still loyal, and the firm, fervent pressure of his arms, as he received her in that sweet embrace, confirmed it.

For some time both remained silent—their hearts too happy for speech.

At length it returned to them, Lena taking the initiative.

"But tell me, Pierre, why did you stay from me, and for such a time?"

"Your question is easily answered, Lena. I have made a long journey to begin with. I have been to California, and spent some time there in searching for gold. But that is not altogether what delayed me. I was for three years a prisoner among the Arapahoes."

"Arapahoes? What are they?"

"A tribe of Indians, who roam over the big prairie. I might have been still in their hands, but for a party of Choctaws—my mother's people, you know—who chanced to come among the Arapahoes. They rescued me by paying a ransom, and brought me back with them to the Choctaw country, west of here, whence I have just come almost direct."

"O, Pierre! I am so happy you are here again. And you have grown so big and so beautiful, Pierre. But you were always beautiful, Pierre. And you have been to California? I heard that. But tell me, why did you go there at all?"

"I went to find my father," he answered, in quiet tones.

"Your father? But he——"

The young girl checked herself at the thought of a fearful incident that only now rose to her remembrance—another episode of that night of horrors.

She repented of her speech, for she believed that Pierre

knew nothing of what had then occurred. He had not been told, either by her father or by herself, that Dick Tarleton had been there, as he was still in an unconscious state when the latter left the cabin never more to return to it.

She had said nothing of it to Pierre after his recovery. Her father had cautioned her against any communication with him on the subject, and indeed there was not much chance, for the moment he was in a condition to travel, the old hunter had hurried him off, going in the dead of night, and taking the youth along with him.

Remembering all this, Lena regretted the speech half-commenced, and was thinking how she should change to another subject, when Pierre, interrupting, relieved her from her embarrassment, as he spoke.

"You need not tell me, Lena," said he, his voice trembling; "I know the sad tale—all of it, perhaps more than you, though it was later that I learnt of it, my sweet innocent! You little dreamt when——But no, I must not. Let us talk no more of those times, but only of the present. And now, Lena, I do not wish to see your father, nor do I want him to know that I am in the neighbourhood. Therefore, you must not say you have seen me."

"I will not," answered she, in a tone that spoke more of sorrow than surprise. "Alas! it is too easy to obey your request, for I dare not even speak of you to him."

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My father, I know not for what reason, has forbidden me to mention your name. If by chance I ever asked after you, or spoke of your coming back, it was only to get scolded. Will you believe it, Pierre, he once told me you were dead? But I grieved so, he afterwards repented, and said he had only done it to try me. God forgive me for speaking so of my own father, but I almost fancied at times that he wished it himself. O Pierre! what have you ever done to make him your enemy?"

"I cannot tell, that is a mystery to me; and so too his sending me away, and so too several other things; but —. Whose voice is that?"

"My father's! And the tramp of his horse! He is coming along the lane. O, Pierre! you must not let him see you!"

"Nor shall he. I can get off as I came, under cover of the trees. Adieu, dearest! meet me to-morrow night. Come out late, when all are gone to bed—say eleven. You'll find me waiting for you here—no, by the big cotton-wood yonder. How often we used to sit under its shade."

"Go, Pierre, go! He's got up to the gate."

"One more kiss, love! and then —"

Their lips met and parted; and they too parted, the girl gliding towards the house, and the young man stealing off among the peach trees, to seek safer concealment in the shadowy woods beyond.

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

"I've got good news for ye, gurl," said Jerry Rook, sliding out of his saddle, and joining her in the porch.

"Darnationed good news."

"What news, father?"

"Thet the liquor hez at last done its work, an' ole Planter Brandon air dead."

"O father! surely you do not call it good news?"

"And shurly I do—the best o' news. Alf air now full master o' the place, an' thar's nothin' to hinder you from bein' full mistress o't. I know he intend makin' you a offer o' marriage, an' I've reezun to b'lieve it'll be done this very day. Brandon war buried day before yesserday."

"If he does, father, I shall refuse him."

"Refuse him!" cried the quondam squatter, half starting out of the chair in which he had just seated himself. "Lena, gurl! hev ye tuk leave o' yur senses? Air ye in airnest?"

"I am, father. I mean what I've said."

"Mean, darnation! ye're eyether mad, gurl, or else talkin' like a chile. D'ye know what refusin' means?"

"I have not thought of it."

"But I hev, over an' over agin. It means beggary—preechap sturvation, for myself as well as you."

"I'd rather starve than marry Alf Brandon."

"Ye woud, woud ye? Then ye may hev a chance o't, sooner'n ye think for. Ye've got an idea yur ole dad's well to do; an' so think a good many other folks. Thar's been a house built, an' a clarin made; but neyther's been paid for. Jerry Rook don't know the day he may hev to up sticks, an' go back agin to some durned old crib o' a cabin."

"Father! I was as happy in our old cabin as I've ever been in this fine house. Aye, far happier."

"Yer war, war ye? But I warn't—not by a long chalk; and I don't want to squat in any o' yer shanties agin—not if I kin keep out o' em. Hyar's a plan by which yur may be rich for the rest o' yur life; an' thur'd be no need for me starvin' eyther. Alf Brandon kums in for a good plantation, wi' three score niggers on it; an' thur's nothin' to hinder yur from bein' mistress o' the hul lot."

"I don't wish it."

"But I do; an' I mean to hev it so. Don't git it in yur head, good-lookin' as yur may think yurself, thet the world air a stick o' sugar-candy an' ye've got nothin' to do but suck it. I tell yur, gurl, I've drifted into difeequilties. I've had some rasources you

know nothin' beout; but I can't tell the day *the supplies may be stopt*, an' then we've got to go under. Now, d'ye unnerstan' me?"

"Indeed, father, I know nothing of your affairs. How should I? But I am sure I should never be happy as the wife of Alfred Brandon."

"An' why? What hev yur got agin him? He's a good-lookin' feller—dog-goned good-lookin'."

"It has nothing to do with his looks."

"What then? His karracktur, I s'pose?"

"You know it is not good."

"Dum karracktur! What signify that? Ef all the young weemen in these parts war to wait till they got a husband o' good karracktur, they'd stay a long spell single, I reck'n. Alf Brandon ain't no worse nor other people; an', what's o' far more konsequence, he air richer than most. Y'ed be a fool, gurl, a dod-rotted eedyit, not to jump at the chance. An' don't you get it into yur head that I'm gwine to let it slip. Willin' or not, ye've got to be the wife o' Alf Brandon. Refuse, an' by the Eternal, ye shall be no longer my darter? Ye hear that?"

"I hear you, father. It is very painful to hear you; and painful, too, for me to tell you, that your threat cannot change me. I'm sure I have been obedient to you in everything else. Why should you force me to this?"

"Wal," said the hardened man, apparently relenting, "I acknowledge ye've been a good gurl; but why shed yur now speil all the chances o' our gettin' a good livin' by yur obstinateness in bizness? I tell ye that my affairs air jest at this time a leetle preecarious. I owe Alf Brandon money—a good grist o't—an' now his father's dead he may be on me for't. Beside, you're o' full age, an' ougter 'be spliced to somebody. Who's better'n Alf Brandon?"

Had Jerry arrived a little sooner at his house, or approached it with greater caution, he might have received a more satisfactory answer to his question. As it was, he got none, his daughter remaining silent, as if not caring to venture a reply.

She had averted her eyes, displaying some slight embarrassment. Something of this the old man must have noticed, as evinced by the remark that followed:—

"Poor white, ye ain't a gwine to marry wi' my consent—I don't care what be his karracktur; an' ef ye've been makin' a fool o' yurself wi' sich, an' gin any promise, ye've got to get out o' it best way ye kin."

Neither was there any rejoinder to this; he sat for a time in silence, as if reflecting on the probability of some such complication.

He had never heard of his daughter having bestowed her heart on any one; and, indeed, she had gained some celebrity for having so long kept it to herself.

For all that, it might have been secretly surrendered; and this would, perhaps, account for her aversion to the man he most wished her to marry.

"I heerd a shot as I war coming along the road. It war the crack o' a rifle, an' sounded as ef 'twar somewhar near the house. Hez anybody been hyar?"

The question was but a corollary to the train of thought he had been pursuing.

Fortunately for the young girl, it admitted of an evasive answer, under the circumstances excusable.

"There has been no one *at the house* since you left. There was a shot though; I heard it myself."

"Whar away?"

"I think down by the creek—maybe in the woods beyond the orchard."

"Thar ain't nothin' in them woods, 'ceptin' squrrl. Who's been squrrl shootin' this time o' day?"

"Some boys, perhaps?"

"Boys! Hey! what's that dog a draggin' out from 'mong the peach trees? Snake, by the Eternal!—a rattler too! The hound ain't killed that varmint himself?"

The old hunter, yielding to curiosity, or some undeclared impulse, stepped down from the porch, and out to where the hound had come to a stop, and was standing by the body of the snake.

Driving the dog aside, he stooped over the dead reptile to examine it.

"Shot through the skull!" he muttered to himself; "an' wi' a rifle, o' sixty to the pound. That ere's been a hunter's gun. Who ked it be? It's been done this side of the crik, too; seems as the dog hain't wetted a hair in fetchin' o't."

Turning along the trail of the snake—which, to his experienced eye, was discernible in the grass—he followed it, till he came to the spot where the snake had been killed.

"Shot hyar for sartin. Yes; thar's the score o' the bullet arter it had passed through the varmint's brain-pan; an' thar's the shoe track o' him as fired the shot. No boy that; but a full growed man! Who the durnation hez been trespassin' 'mong my peach trees?"

He bent down over the track, and carefully scrutinized them. Then rising erect, he followed them to the bank of the creek, where he saw the same footprints, more conspicuously outlined in the mud.

"Stranger for sartin!" muttered he; "no sich futmark as that 'beout these settlements—not as I know on. Who the durnation kin it a-been?"

It was strange he should take so much trouble about a circumstance so slight; or show such anxiety to discover who had been the intruder. He was evidently

uneasy about something of more importance to him than the trespass among his peach trees.

"That gurl must a heerd the shot plainer than she's been tellin' me o', an' seed more'n she's confessed to. Thar's somethin' on her mind, I hain't been able to make out any how. She shell be put thro' a chapter o' kattykism."

"Lena, gurl!" he continued, going back towards the porch, still occupied by his daughter; "d'ye mean to say ye seed nobody beout hyar to-day?"

"I see some one now," said she; by the rarest bit of good luck enabled to evade giving an answer to the question.

"See some un now! Whar?"

"There, a friend of yours, coming along the lane."

"Alf Brandon!" exclaimed the old hunter, hurrying forth to receive the individual then announced; and who, astride a sleek horse, was seen riding leisurely in the direction of the house.

For Lena Rook it was an opportune arrival; and, for a time at least, she was spared that threatened "chapter o' kattykism."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ANGRY ADMIRER.

FOR the first time in her life, Lena Rook saw Alfred Brandon approach her father's house without a feeling of pain or repulsion.

Though for years he had been the most solicitous of her suitors, she felt for him something more than contempt.

Despite his position in society—far superior to her own—despite his fine clothes and speeches, she saw through the character of the man, and believed him to be both a pretender and poltroon.

She knew that he was cruel—a tyrant to all who had the misfortune to be under him, and a hard task-master to the black-skinned slaves that lived upon his father's plantation.

Though dissipated, he was not generous; and, with all the plenty he possessed, he was accounted among his associates the closest of screws. He spent money, and enough of it, but only upon himself, and in the indulgence of his own sensual desires.

He had obtained the reputation of being one of the

meanest fellows in the neighbourhood to which he belonged ; and Lena Rook knew it.

She had never liked him as a boy ; and her aversion was increased by her knowledge that, as a boy, he had been the bitter enemy of Pierre Robideau.

She did not think how much of this hostility was due to herself ; for, from an early period, the son of the planter had been bitterly jealous of her playmate and companion.

But she remembered the scene in the glade ; she believed that Alf Brandon had been the chief instigator ; and she had, all along, suspected that Pierre's absence was in some way due to what had that day transpired.

She was very pleased to see Brandon now, only because he had rescued her from a position that promised to become embarrassing. What answer could she have made to that question her father had asked ?

The opportune arrival had relieved her from an agony of apprehension.

The planter—now that his father was dead, no longer the planter's son—seemed a little surprised at the pleased look with which she received him. She was not accustomed to give him such gracious acceptance, and little dreamt he of its cause.

"No doubt," reasoned he, with a feeling of self-gratulation, "she's heard I'm now my own master, and

won't much object to my becoming her's. A planter in his own right is a very different individual from a planter expectant; and Miss Lena Rook will have the sense to see it. I don't think there will be much difficulty about this thing. She's been only pretending with me in the past; now that she sees all's ready, I guess she'll not stand shilly-shallying any longer. So here goes for the proposals."

This string of reflections were made after Alfred Brandon had entered the gate, and was making his way towards the porch, on which the young lady was still standing. They were finished as he set foot on the step.

There was no one to interfere with the conversation that came after. Jerry Rook, suspecting the purport of the planter's visit, had stayed behind to hitch up his horse, and afterwards found excuse to stray off to the back of the house, leaving the two alone.

"I suppose you have heard of my affliction, Miss Rook?" said Brandon, after salutations had been exchanged.

"My father has been just telling me of it."

"Ah! yes; my old dad's dead and gone; buried him day before yesterday. Can't be helped, you know. It's the way of us all. We've all got to die."

To this lugubrious declaration Lena Rook yielded ready assent.

There was a pause in the conversation. Notwithstanding his plentitude of power, tending to inspire him with sufficient assurance, the suitor felt ill at ease. It was not to be wondered at, considering the errand on which he had come.

Moreover, the pleasant look had forsaken Lena's face, and he had begun to doubt of success.

She knew what he had come for, and was seriously reflecting upon the answer she should give him.

She, of course, intended it to be negative; but she remembered her father's words, and was thinking in what way she might reject the disagreeable suitor, without stirring up his spite. She so well understood his nature as to know he would be contemptible enough to use it.

It was no thought of herself that dictated the affability with which she was entertaining him; though she could scarce conceal her disgust for the man before her, talking in such strains of a father so recently deceased.

She, too, had a father, who was not what he ought to be; and she knew it. But still he was her father.

After remaining for some time silent—not knowing what to say—Brandon at length summoned sufficient courage to stammer out his proposal. It was done with some fear and trembling.

He was more himself after he had received the refusal,

which he did, in as delicate terms as the young lady could command.

But, delicacy was thrown away upon the spiteful planter, who, stung by the thought of being refused by the daughter of a poor white—he knew the secret of Jerry Rook's altered circumstances—began upbraiding in terms of opprobrious wrath the woman from whose feet he had just arisen!

The young girl, thus grossly outraged, would have called to her father for protection, but again remembering his words, she remained silent under the infliction, not even making answer to her cowardly insulter.

"Somebody else, I suppose," said the rejected gentleman, spitefully pronouncing the words. "Some poor 'trash' of your own sort has got a hold of you! By ——!" the ruffian swore a frightful oath, "if it be so, when I find out who it is, and I don't care who it is, I'll make these settlements too hot to hold him! *Lena Rook, you'll rue this refusal!*"

Not a word said Lena Rook in reply to this coarse invective. A disdainful curl upon her lip was all the answer she vouchsafed; which stayed there as she stood watching him along the walk, and until he had remounted his horse, and galloped off from the gate.

Her's were not the only eyes bent upon the disappointed suitor. Jerry Rook, engaged among the pigs

and poultry, saw him ride away ; and from the spiteful spurring of his horse, and the reckless air with which he rode, the old hunter conjectured the sort of answer that had been given him.

"Durn the girl!" muttered he, as a black shadow swept across his wrinkled brow ; "she's played fool, an' refused him! Looks as ef she'd sassed him! Never mind, Alf Brandon, I'll make it all right for you. This chile ain't a gwine to let that fine plantashin c' your's slip through his fingers—not ef he know it. You shall hev the gurl, and she you, ef I hev myself to drag her up to the haltar. So, then, my Lena, lass, when I've done here I'm a gwine to read you a lecture."

If the abrupt departure of Brandon had brought anger into the eyes of Lena Rook, there was yet another pair watching it, that became suffused with joy.

They were the eyes of Pierre Robideau.

After parting from that sweetheart so long separated from him, the young man had recrossed the creek ; and, as he had intended, kept on through the woods towards the stand where he had left his horse.

Before going far, the thought occurred to him that he might as well have a look at the quondam squatter, and see if he, too, was changed like everything else.

It was only to place himself in the ambush that had already proved so serviceable to his purposes, and stay there till Jerry should show himself.

Knowing that the porches of a backwood's dwelling usually supplies the place of sitting-room, he did not anticipate any severe trial of patience.

It was not the gratification of mere curiosity that tempted him to return. He had other reasons that rendered him desirous to look upon his host of former days; at the same time that he was equally desirous not to let that host see him.

Nor was it exactly a desire that counselled him to this act; but a sort of involuntary impulse, such as the bird feels to approach the serpent that would destroy it.

Pierre Robideau had returned from California, better informed about the doings of Jerry Rook than he had been on going out there. It was the old hunter who had induced him to take that distant journey. He had counselled, almost compelled, him to it, by a false story that his father had gone there before him, and had entrusted Jerry to send him after in all haste. For this purpose, his former host had furnished the outfit and directions, and had even seen him some distance on his way.

As already stated the unsuspecting youth, before starting, knew nothing of what had occurred that night in the glade—not even that while he was himself hanging there, his father had been so near him!

The story of the lynching had been kept from him previous to his departure, Jerry Rook alone having

access to him, and carefully guarding against all other approach.

It was only after his arrival in California, and failing to find his father at the appointed place, that he had heard of the tragedy on Caney Creek, and who had been its victim.

The tale had got among the gold diggers, brought out by some new arrivals from Little Rock.

Why Jerry Rook had been so anxious to get him away, Pierre Robideau could never tell, though he had some terrible suspicions about it—almost pointing out the old squatter as one of his father's murderers.

It was this sort of curiosity that caused him to turn among the trees, and steal back to the concealment he had so recently forsaken. Perhaps, too, he may have wished once more to gratify his eyes by gazing on that loved form so unceremoniously hurried out of his sight.

Whether or not, he was soon in his old position, and gazing intently through the curtain of leaves.

So far as Jerry Rook was concerned, he obtained the satisfaction he had sought for. His quondam host was in front of the house, in conversation with his daughter, who stood in the porch above him.

Pierre had arrived at the moment when that question was put, so nearly concerning himself.

He did not hear it, but he noticed the embarrassed

air of the young lady, and the quick change that came over her countenance as she adroitly evaded the answer.

From that moment Jerry Rook was no longer regarded. A third personage had appeared upon the scene, and the pleasing look with which Jerry Rook's daughter appeared to receive him sent a pang through the heart of Pierre Robideau.

The exclamation had told him who the new comer was. But he did not heed that.

No time could efface from his memory the image of one who had so cruelly outraged him, and six years had produced but little change in Alf Brandon.

Pierre knew him on sight.

With heart beating wildly, he remained a silent witness of the scene that ensued.

At first it beat bitterly, as he marked and misinterpreted the complaisant look with which Lena regarded his rival.

Ere long came a delightful change, as he listened to the dialogue—plainly overheard where he stood—and, when he heard the final speech, and saw the discomfited lover stride off towards the gate, he could scarce restrain himself from a shout of joy.

He was fain to have sprung across the creek, and once more enfolded that fair form in his passionate embrace. But he saw that mischief might spring from

such imprudence ; and, turning from the spot, he walked silently away—his heart now swelling with triumph, now subsiding into sweet contentment.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONCLAVE OF SCOUNDRELS.

THERE was a time when "Slaughter's Hotel" was the first and only house of its kind in the town of Helena. That was when Slaughter, senior, presided over its destinies. Now that he was no more, and his son walked rather slipshod in his shoes, it had sunk into a second-rate place of entertainment—an establishment more respectable, or, at all events, more pretentious, having swung out its sign.

In Slaughter's hostelry *bond fide* travellers had become scarce. Still it was not without guests and patrons in plenty. There were enough "sportsmen" in the place, with adventurers of other kinds, to give the house a custom, and these principally patronised it. From a family hotel, it had changed into a drinking and gambling saloon, and in this respect was prosperous enough. It was the resort of all the dissipated young men of the neighbourhood—and the old ones too. It had public and private parlours, and one of the latter,

the landlord's own, was only accessible to the select of his acquaintances—his cronies of a special type.

On the evening of that day in which Alfred Brandon had received his dismissal from the daughter of Jerry Rook, this apartment was occupied by six persons, including the landlord himself. They were the same who had figured in the hanging frolic, of which young Robideau had been so near being the victim. On this account, it is not necessary to give their names nor any description of them, farther than to say that all six were as wild and wicked as ever, or, to speak with greater exactitude, wilder and more wicked.

It might seem strange that chance had brought these young men together without any other company, but the closed door, and the order for no one to be admitted, showed that their meeting was not by mere accident. Their conversation, already commenced, told that they had met by appointment, as also the purpose of their assembling.

It was Alfred Brandon who had summoned them to the secret conclave, and he who made the opening speech, declaring his object in having done so.

After "drinks all round," Brandon had said :—

"Well, boys, I've sent for you to meet me here, and here we are, guests ; you know why ?"

"I guess we don't," bluntly responded Buck.

"Choc?" suggested Slaughter.

"Well, we know it's about Choc," assented the son of the horse dealer; "any fool might guess that. But what about him? Let's hear what you've got to say, Alf."

"Well, not much, after all. Only that I think it's high time we took some steps to get rid of this infernal tax we've been paying."

"Oh! you're come to that, are you? I thought you would sometime. But for you, Alf Brandon, we might have done somethin' long ago. I'm out o' pocket clear five hundred dols, and d—— me if I intend to pay another cent, come what will or may."

"Ditto with you, Bill Buck," endorsed Slaughter.

Grubbs, Randall, and Spence were silent, though evidently inclined to the same way of thinking.

"I've sworn every year I'd stop it," continued Buck, "an' I'd have done so but for Alf there. It's all very well for him. He's rich, and can stand it. With some of the rest of us it's dog-gone different."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Brandon. "My being rich had nothing to do with it. I was as anxious as any of you to get the load off my shoulders, only I could never see how it was to be done."

"Do you see now?" asked Spence.

"Not very clearly, I confess."

"It's clear as mud to me—one way is——" said Slaughter.

"And to me," chimed in Buck.

"What way? Tell us?" demanded the store-keeper. "I'm ready for most anything that'll clear us of that tax."

"You can get clear, then, by making a *clear* of the collector."

The suggestion was Slaughter's, the last part of it made in a significant whisper.

"Them's just my sentiments," said Buck, speaking louder and with more determination. "I'd have put 'em in practice before this, if Alf Brandon had showed the pluck to agree to it. Durned if I wouldn't!"

"What!" said the young planter, affecting ignorance of the suggested scheme, "carry the collector off? "Is that what you mean?"

"Oh! you're very innocent, Alf Brandon, you are, my icking dove!"

It was Slaughter who spoke.

"Yes," said Buck, who answered to the interrogatory, "carry him off, and so far that there'll be no danger o' his coming back again. That's what we mean. Have you got anything better to propose? If you have, let's hear it. If not, what's the use of all this palaverin'?"

"Well," said Brandon, "I've been thinking we might carry something else off that might answer our purpose as well, and without getting us into any *scrape* worth talking about."

"Carry what off? The girl—Rook's daughter?"

"No, no; Brandon don't mean that, and don't need it. He is going to take her to church, and there's no danger about his getting consent."

It was Buck who made the remark, and with some bitterness, being himself one of Lena Rook's unsuccessful admirers.

Brandon felt the sting all the more keenly from what had that day occurred. Moreover, he knew that Buck was upon the list of his rivals, and saw that the speech was meant for a slur.

The lurid light in his eye, and the pallor suddenly overspreading his lips, showed the depth of his chagrin. But he said nothing, fearful of defeating the scheme he had traced out for himself in relation to Lena Rook.

"Come, gentlemen," said Randall, for the first time entering into the conversation, "this talk only wastes time, and the subject is too serious for that. Let us hear Brandon out. I'm as anxious as any of you to settle this unpleasant matter, and if there be any safe plan we can all agree about, the sooner it's carried out the better. I needn't remind you the time's close at hand when the old Shylock will call for another pound of flesh. If any one can suggest a way to escape paying it, I think the most of us would be but too willing to stand the best champagne supper Jim Slaughter can get up for us, and a 'jury' into the bargain."

"Certain we'll all go snacks for that."

"Speak out, Brandon!"

"The fact is," said Brandon, thus appealed to, "we've been all a lot of fools to stand this thing so long. Supposing we have the old scoundrel, and dare him to do his worst, what evidence has he got against us only his own oath?"

"An' the girl's."

"No; the girl saw nothing, at least, only what was circumstantial. She couldn't swear to the deed; nor he neither, as far as that goes, though he makes pretence that he can. Suppose he does swear, what then? There are six of us—six oaths to one. I needn't ask whether you are all willing?"

"No, you needn't," was the unanimous rejoinder.

"Good, so far. I think you all know that Jerry Rook's oath wouldn't go far about these parts, and if we stick together and deny the thing *in toto*, I'd like to know how a jury could give against us. We've been fools not to try it. I'd have proposed it long ago, only that, like some of the rest, I've been thin-skinned about it, and didn't like to stir up stinking waters."

"Yes," cried Buck; "you've been thin-skinned 'bout it—no mistake o' that. Your d——d thin-skinnedness, as you call it, has cost me five hundred silver dollars."

"Me the same," said Slaughter.

"Well, for that matter, we all had to pay alike; and now let us all agree to share alike in any law expenses, in case it should come to that; for my part, I don't think it will."

"And why won't it?" asked Randall, whose law experience, himself being a practitioner, guided him to a different conclusion. "You don't suppose that the old Shylock will yield without a trial? Trust me, fellows, he'll fight hard to stick to that six hundred dollars *per annum* he's been so long pulling out of us."

"D—— him! let him fight! What can he do? Let him tell his story, and what evidence can he bring to support it? As I've said, his oath won't count for anything against all six of ours."

"But, Alf, you forget the *body*?"

This reminiscence called up by Randall, caused all the others to start; for all had forgotten it—Brandon alone excepted.

"No, I don't," replied the latter, with an air of triumph at his own astuteness.

"Well, he'd bring that up, wouldn't he?"

"No doubt he would, if we're fools enough to let him."

"Ah! I see what you're driving at."

"So do we all."

"We know where *it* lies; we've had good reason to. We've been soft to let it lie there so long, and we'd be

softer still to let it lie there any longer."

"Darn it, there's something in what he says."

"What do you propose, Alf?"

"That we go in for a good bit of quiet exhumation, and transfer that body, or bones, or whatever relics be left of it, to a safer place. After that's done let Jerry Rook do his worst."

"A good idea!"

"Jest the thing, by Gob!"

"Let's carry it out, then!"

"When?"

"To-morrow night; we're not prepared now, or it might be to-night. Let us provide the tools for to-morrow night, and meet about midnight. We can come together in the glade, and go from there. You must all of you come, and all have a hand in it.

"Agreed! We'll do the grave digging!"

"Enough, boys! Let's fill up and drink to our success!"

Amidst the clinking of glasses was sealed the singular compact; and the body stealers, that were to be, soon after separated, to come together again upon the morrow.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRYST UNDER THE TREE.

UNDER the canopy of the great cottonwood the tryst of the lovers was to be kept.

Pierre was there first, and stood within the shadow of the tree, expectant.

There had been nothing to interfere with his coming, either to hinder or retard it. He had left the tavern at an early hour, telling them he might not return that night; and slowly sauntering through the woods, had reached the place of appointment some time before that agreed upon.

Having arrived under the tree, and taken a survey of the ground, [he regretted having chosen it as a rendezvous.

Better need not have been desired had the night been dark; but it was not; on the contrary, a clear moon was sailing through the sky.

When Pierre Robideau last stood under that tree there was brushwood around it, with a cane brake along the edge of the creek. Both were now gone; burnt off long ago to enlarge the little clearing that had sufficed for the cabin of the squatter. There were the stumps of

other trees still, and a rough rail fence running up to the corner of the house; but with the exception of these, any one approaching from the house side would find no cover to prevent them from being seen.

It occurred to Pierre Robideau that his sweetheart might be watched. He had reason to believe that her father kept a close eye upon her, and might be suspicious of her movements. What he had seen and heard the day before told him how things stood between Jerry Rook and Alf Brandon.

Once under the cottonwood there would be no danger; even the white dress of a woman could not be descried in the deep shadow of the moss-laden branches—at least, not from any distance, and in case of any one passing accidentally near, the young man knew that the tree was hollow—a huge cavity opening into its trunk, capable of holding a horse. More than once, when a boy, had he and little Lena played hide and seek in this capacious tree-chamber.

On the other side, that opposite to the house, the tree could be approached under cover, along the edge of the creek, where a thin strip of wood had been left standing undisturbed. It was through this he had himself come, after crossing the creek some distance above.

Eleven o'clock came, as he knew by a clock striking inside the house, and then a long spell that seemed nearly a day, though it was not quite an hour. Still no

sign of his sweetheart, nor of living thing anywhere outside the dwelling of Jerry Rook.

He could see the porch, and one of the windows beyond it; through this came the light of a lamp or candle indistinct under the bright shimmer of the moonbeams.

Upon the window his eyes were habitually kept, and he indulged in conjecture as to who was the occupant of the lighted room. At first he supposed it to be Lena; but as the time passed without the appointment being kept, he began to fancy it might be her father.

He had no knowledge of the interior of the house; but if the lighted window belonged to the kitchen, it was like enough the old hunter was inside, sitting in a huge arm-chair, and smoking his pipe, a habit that Pierre knew him to indulge in days long past. Moreover, he might set very late up into the morning hours, as he had been often accustomed to do in those same days.

The remembrance made Pierre uneasy, especially as the time stole past, and still no appearance of the expected one.

He was beginning to despair of an interview that night, when the light upon which his eyes had been fixed appeared to have been put out, as the glass showed black under the moonbeams.

"It was she, then," he muttered to himself. "She

has been waiting till all were well asleep. She will come now."

Forsaking the window, his gaze became fixed upon the porch, within whose shadow he expected her to appear.

She did so, but not until another long interval had elapsed—a fresh trial of the lover's patience.

Before it was exhausted, however, a form became outlined in the dark doorway—the door having been silently opened—and soon after the moon shone down upon the drapery of a woman's dress.

The white kerchief upon her head would have enabled Pierre Robideau to recognise her. But that was not needed. The direction she took on stepping out of the porch, told him it was she whom he expected.

She came on, but not as one who walks without fear. She kept along the fence, on its shadowy side, and close in to the rails. Now and then she stopped, looked behind, and listened. That she feared was evidently not abroad, but at home. Some serious cause had detained her beyond her time.

Pierre watched her with eager eyes, with heart beating impatiently, until he felt hers beating against it.

Once more they stood breast to breast, with arms entwining.

Why was she so late? What had detained her?

The questions were put with no thought of reproach, only fear as to the answer.

As Pierre had suspected, Jerry Rook had been sitting up late; and, as she suspected, with some idea of watching her. The lighted room was his, and it was he who had extinguished the candle; she had waited after, till he should be well asleep. She had a terrible time of it, both that day and yesterday. Her father had been very angry with her about several things; he had found out that Pierre had been there; he had cross-questioned her, and made her confess it. It was no use denying it, as her father had found his track, and saw the snake that had been shot; and, besides, one of the negroes had heard a man's voice along with hers among the trees of the orchard. It made it all the worse that she had tried to conceal it, and been found out. Of course she did not say who it was, only a stranger *she had never seen before*.

"O, Pierre! I told that great lie about you. God forgive me!"

Her father had gone furious; there was something else, too, that made him so—about Alf Brandon, who had come over to see them just after Pierre had gone.

"What was it about Alf Brandon?" asked Pierre, rather calmly, considering that the individual spoken of was a most dangerous rival.

The young girl noticed this, and answered with some pique.

"Oh! nothing much," she said, relaxing the pressure

of her arms. "At least, nothing, I suppose, you would care about."

"Nay, dear Lena!" he hastily rejoined, noticing the hurt he had unconsciously occasioned, and drawing her back to his breast, "pardon me for the apparent coldness of the question; I only asked it because I wished to tell you that I know all."

"All what, Pierre?"

"All that occurred between you and Alf Brandon."

"And who told you?"

"No one. I'm going to make a confession if you'll promise not to be angry with me."

"Angry with you, Pierre?"

"Well, then, it was thus: after leaving you yesterday, I came back again, and took stand under cover of the trees, just over the creek there, at the bottom of the garden. Of course, I could see the house, and all in front of it. I got there just as your father was leaving to meet Mr. Brandon by the gate, and I not only saw what passed between you two, but heard most of what was said. It was much as I could do to restrain myself from springing across the creek, and laying the fellow at your feet; but I kept back, thinking of the trouble I might get you into, to say nothing of myself, with your father. I own to all this meanness, Lena, without being able to let you know my motive for it. One reason for my returning, was to look again upon you."

"Oh, Pierre," said the girl, once more reciprocating the pressure of his embrace, "if I had only known you were there! But, no; perhaps it was better not. I might have done something that would have betrayed us both."

"True," he said. "And, from what I know of your father's designs, I see that we cannot be too cautious. But, promise me, love; promise, before we part, that, no matter what may arise, nor how long it may be before I gain your father's consent, that you will still keep true to me. Will you promise this?"

"Promise it! How could you doubt me? After six years—more I may say, for I loved you ever since I first knew you, aye, Pierre, when I was only a little bit of a bare-footed girl—after being true all that time, surely you will not doubt me now? Promise it! Anything, Pierre—anything!"

Firmer and faster became the folding of their arms, closer and closer came their lips, till meeting, they remained together in a long, rapturous kiss.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREE CAVE.

A LONG, rapturous kiss, and a kiss that came nigh betraying them.

Fortunately, it had ended before anyone was near enough to bear witness to it, or blight its sweetness by rude interruption.

The lovers were about taking leave of each other, their arms were once more free, and they were arranging the time and place for another interview, when the quick ear of the young man, attuned to take notice of suspicious sounds, was caught by one that appeared to be of this character.

It was a rustling among the canes that bordered the creek, with now and then their culms crackling together as if something—man or animal—was making way through them.

The sounds proceeded from a point at some distance; but, as the lovers stood listening, they could tell that, whatever made them, was drawing nearer.

And soon they saw that they were not made by an animal, nor yet by a man, but by several men, who, under the clear light of the moon, could be seen approaching the spot.

And it could be seen, too, that they were not coming on openly and boldly, like men bent on an honest errand, but skulking along the edge of the creek, here and there crouching under the cane, whose thin growth only partially concealed them. The noise they made was inadvertent. They were not making more than they could help, and, if there was any talk between them, it must have been in whispers, as no words were heard by the two standing under the tree.

For them it was too late to retreat unobserved.

They might have done so at first; but not now. The skulkers were too near, and any attempt to get away from the spot would expose the lovers under the full light of the moon.

Their only chance to remain undiscovered was to keep within the shadow of the tree.

Not long before, this, too, appeared doubtful; as they now saw that the dark forms advancing along the edge of the stream must pass close to where they stood—so close as to see them in spite of the obscurity.

Who the cautious travellers were, or what their designs, neither had the slightest idea. But it mattered not what. Enough for the lovers to know that they were in danger of being surprised, and under circumstances to cause them chagrin.

What was to be done? The skulkers were coming on. They would soon be under the tree!

The returned gold-seeker had taken the young girl on his arm—partly with the idea of protecting her should any rudeness be attempted, and partly to inspire her with courage.

He was thinking whether it would not be the best for them to step boldly out and show themselves in the open light. It would less expose them to ridicule, though the lateness of the hour—it was now after midnight—would still render them liable to that. A young lady and gentleman—they had markedly this appearance—indulging in a moonlight stroll at nigh one o'clock of the morning, were not likely to escape scandal if seen.

What was to be done?

At this moment a happy thought came up to answer the question. It flashed simultaneously through the minds of both. Both remembered the cavity in the tree; and without a word to one another—both acting under the same impulse—they glided inside, and stood in shadow dark as the dungeon itself!

They had scarce time to compose themselves ere the party of intruders came up, and stopped right under the tree. To their chagrin they saw this. They had hoped that such early travellers might be bent upon some distant journey, and that once past the spot they would be themselves free to continue their affectionate leave-taking.

They soon perceived that this was not to be. The

new comers had halted close up to the trunk, directly in front of the cavity, and although enveloped in deep shadow their figures were distinguishable from the deeper shadow that surrounded the two spectators. Either of these could have touched them by stretching forth a hand!

Neither had thoughts of doing this. On the contrary, they stood motionless as marble, both silently striving to keep back their breath.

Six figures there were—six men—several of them carrying implements, at first taken for guns, but which, on more prolonged scrutiny, proved to be spades and shovels. From the way they were manipulating these tools it was evident they intended making use of them, and on the spot!

The occupants of the tree-cave were puzzled by these preparations. For what were they going to dig?

The blood of both ran cold at the thought of its being a *grave*. And both had it. What else could they have thought? Six men, armed with excavating implements, at that unearthly time of the night!

And a secret grave, too, for the body of some one whom they had murdered! Else why their stealthy movements, and their talking in low tones, scarce louder than a whisper?

Who could they be? And what their purpose?

These were the questions that came before the minds

of Pierre Robideau and Lena Rook, only in thought; they dared not interrogate one another even in whispers. They stood silent, watching the development of events.

"Where can the darned thing be?" asked one of the men, stooping down, and apparently searching for something along the grass. "Who of ye remembers the spot?"

"A little farther out, I think," answered a voice that caused Lena Rook to start, and take hold of Pierre's hand. "About here. Yes, here it is. I can feel the lumps upon the turf."

"The speaker appeared to be groping the ground with his feet.

"Alf Brandon!" whispered the girl, with her lips close to her companion's ear.

The others gathered around the spot indicated by Brandon.

Two who carried spades commenced digging, while a like number of shovel-men followed, throwing out the loose earth.

"Wonder how deep the old skunk has buried him?" asked one.

"Not very deep, I reck'n. Jerry Rook's too lazy to a dug far down. We'll soon come to it."

These were the voices of Bill Buck and Slaughter, the hotel-keeper, recognised by Lena Rook, though not by her companion.

"Do you think there's a coffin?" inquired one who had not yet spoken. It was Spence.

"No," answered another new speaker, recognised as Lawyer Randall, "I should say not. The old squatter wasn't likely to take that trouble for such a creature as Choc, and, as the fellow had no other friends, I think you'll find him in his deerskin shirt—that is, if Jerry harn't taken the pains to strip him."

"The shirt wasn't worth it," remarked a sixth speaker, who was the storekeeper, Grubbs.

"The six who hanged you, Pierre!" whispered the girl to him by her side. "The very same!"

Pierre made no reply. He was too much occupied in endeavouring to interpret the strange talk, and comprehend the singular scene passing before him.

"It's getting hard down here," said one of the spadesmen. "Seems to me I've touched bottom."

"Old Jerry must have tramped him tight down," remarked another, adding a slight laugh.

"Don't speak so loud, boys!" commanded Brandon. "Look at the house, 'tisin't twenty yards off, and there's a weasel in it that seldom sleeps. If we're heard, you know what'll follow. Keep silent, it may save each of you a hundred dollars a-year."

At this appeal the diggers turned their eyes towards the house; but only to give a cursory glance, and back to the ground again.

Lena Rook looked longer in that direction, for there was the man she most feared--her father.

Intimately acquainted with the precincts of the dwelling, and, of course, better able to tell if anything was stirring, she saw--what had escaped the notice of the body-stealers--the front door standing open! It should have been shut; for, on coming out, she had carefully closed it behind her!

She had scarce made the discovery when she saw a figure in the doorway, that, after standing a moment as if to reconnoitre and listen, stole out into the porch, and then, stealthily descending the steps, glided crouchingly towards the cover of the orchard. Only for a moment was it under the moonlight; but the young girl had no difficulty in recognising the form of her father!

Something in his hands glistened in the moonlight. It appeared to be a gun.

Pierre's attention is called to it by a significant pressure on his arm. Pierre also saw the flitting figure and knew whose it was.

The weasel, as Alf Brandon termed him, had not been asleep!

And just like a weasel he had acted; in sight only for six seconds, as he shot across the open space between the porch and the peach trees.

Once among these, he was invisible to the only eyes

that had seen him, those of his daughter and Pierre Robideau.

But both expected soon to see him again. He had not gone into the orchard for nothing, and his cat-like movements told that he had suspicion of something astir under the cottonwood, and was stealing round by the creek to approach it unobserved.

Whether he yet saw the excavators could not be known, but he must have heard the clinking of their tools as he stood in the doorway.

Not one of them either heard or saw him, as, without pausing, they continued their work, Brandon having once again counselled them to silence.

"Darned if 'taint the bottom! I told you so," said Bill Buck, striking his spade point against the ground under his feet. "Thar's been neyther pick nor spade into this not since the days of old Noah, I reckon. There! try for yourself, Alf Brandon!"

Brandon took the implement offered, and struck it upon the space already stripped, and sunk some eighteen inches below the surface. The ring was that of solid earth that had never been disturbed by a spade.

He tried it in several places, all of which gave back the same sound!

"Clear out the loose mould!" commanded he.

This was done, and once more was the test applied.

"There's no grave there," remarked Randall.

"Nor body," said Spence.

"Not so much as a bone," added Buck; "no, nor never has been. Doggone my cats, if old Rook hasn't been humbuggin' us!"

"Ha—ha! He—he—he—he!"

The sounds thus represented were intended for a laugh, that came from the other side of the tree, and in a voice that did not belong to any of the excavating party.

Whatever mirth may have been in the man who uttered them, it failed to communicate itself to any of the six grave-diggers, all of whom, startled at the strange noise, stood staring wildly around them.

If the body for which they had been searching had suddenly appeared in their midst, and given utterance to that unearthly cachination, they could not have been more astonished.

And their astonishment lasted until a man, well known to them, stepped from behind the tree, and discovered himself in the clear moonlight.

"Jerry Rook, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DIGGERS DISMISSED.

"YES, Jerry Book, by the Eternal!" exclaimed the old hunter, with another mocking laugh. "An' why thet, I shed like to know? Do it astonish ye to see a man by the side o' his own gurden? I reckon this chile hev got more reezun to be surprised at seein' you hyar, one an' all o' ye. Who air ye anyhow?" he asked, drawing nearer to the party, and pretending to examine their faces. "Ef this chile ain't mistaken he heard Bill Buck among ye. Yes, Billee, thet's you, an' Mr. Planter Brandon, an' as thar's four more o' ye, I reckon I kin guess who the t'others air. An' what mout ye a been doin'? Spades and shovels! Ho—ho! ye've been a grave-diggin', hev ye? Wal, I hope ye've goed deep enough. You're a gwine to berry somebidy, air ye?"

There was no reply. The six excavators had thrown down their tools, and stood in sullen silence.

"Maybe ye were arter the other thing. Doin' a bit of dissinterry as they call it? Wal, I hope ye foun' what ye hev been rootin' for?"

Still no response.

"An' so, Mr. Bill Buck, you think that Jerry Rook hez been a humbuggin' ye?"

"I do," replied Buck, doggedly.

"And so do I."

"Yes; so all of us."

"Oh! ye're agreed beout thet, air ye? Wal, ye ain't a gwine to humbug *me* as ye've been jest now a tryin'. I warn't sech a precious fool as to put the poor young fellur's karkiss whar you could kum and scrape it up agin whenever you'd a mind. Ne'er a bit o't. I've got it safer stowed than that, an' I'll take care o't too, till ye refuse to keep to your contract. When any o' ye do that I'll then do a bit o' dissenterry myself, you see ef I don't."

The discomfited excavators had once more relapsed into silence. Having nothing to say by which they could justify themselves, they made no attempt. It was no use to deny either what they had been doing, or its design. Jerry Rook saw the one, and guessed the other.

"Ye 'pear very silent beout it," he continued, jeeringly. "Wal, ef you've got nothing to say, I reckon you'd better all go hum to yur beds an' sleep the thing over. Preehaps some o' ye may dream whar the body air laid. Ha—ha—ha!"

They were not all silent, though their speech was not

addressed to him. There was whispering among themselves, in which Bill Buck and Slaughter took the principal part; and had there been lights enough for Jerry Rook to see the faces of these two men, and the demoniac fire in their eyes, as they glanced at him, and then towards the spades, he might have changed his hilarious tune, and, perhaps, made hasty retreat into the house.

There was a suggestion that the half-dug grave should be deepened, and a body put into it—the body of Jerry Rook! It came from Slaughter, and was backed by Bill Buck. But the others were not plucky enough for such an extreme measure; and the old squatter was spared. Perhaps his rifle had something to do with the decision. They saw that he had it with him, and, although Jerry Rook was a sexagenarian, they knew him to be a sure and deadly shot. He would not be conquered without a struggle.

“What the ole Nick air ye whisperin’ ’beout?” he asked, seeing them with their heads together. “Plotting some kind o’ a conspiracy, air ye? Wal, plot away. Ef ye kin think o’ any way that’ll git ye clear o’ payin’ me your hundred dollars apiece pree-annum, I’d like to hear it. I know a way, myself, maybe you’d like to hear it?”

“Let’s hear it, then!”

“Wal, I am open to a offer, or, I’ll make one to you; whichsomer you weesh”

"Make it!"

"Durn it, don't be so short 'beout it. I only want to be accommodatin'. Ef you'll each an' all o' ye pay me five hundred a piece, down on the nail, an' no darduck-shin, I'll gie you a clar receet, an' squar up the hul buzness now!"

"We can't give you an answer now, Jerry Rook," interposed the planter, without waiting for the others. "We shall consider your proposal, and tell you some other time."

"Wal, tak' yur own time; but remember, all o' ye, thet Saturday nex air the day of the annival settlin'; an' don't fail to meet me at the usooal place. I hain't no spare beds, or I'd ask you all in; but I s'pose ye'll be a goin' back wi' Mr. Slaughter thar, an' havin' a drink by way o' night cap? Don't forgit your spades; they mout git stole ef you left 'em hyar."

This bit of irony terminated the scene, so far as the disappointed resurrectionists were concerned, who, like, a band of prowling jackals, scared from a carcass, turned in their tracks and sneaked sulkily away.

"He! he! he!" chuckled the old pirate, as he stood watching them. "Out of the field—he! he! he!" he continued, stooping over the fresh turned earth, and examining their work. "They *war* playin' a game wi' poor cards in thar hand—the set o' cussed greenhorns! Durnation!"

That this last exclamation had no reference to the episode just ended, was evident from the cloud that passed over his countenance while giving utterance to it. Something else had come into his thoughts, all at once changing them from gay to grave.

"Durnation!" he repeated, stamping on the ground, and glancing angrily around him. "I'd most forgotten it! Whar kin the gurl hev gone?"

"Ain't in her bed; nor ain't a been this night! *Ain't* in the house neyther! Whar kin she be?"

"I thort I mout a foun' her hyar; but this hain't hed nuthin' ter do wi' her. It kedn't a' hed.

"Durn me, ef I don't b'lieve she's goed out to meet some un'; an', maybe, that same fellar as shot the snake! Who the red thunder kin he be? By the Eternal, ef't be so, I'll put a eend to his snake shooting!

"Whar *kin* the gurl be? I shall look all night, or I'll find her. She ain't in the orchart, or I'd a seed her comin' through. An' shurly she ain't goed across the crik? Maybe she's strayed up behint the stable or the corn-cribs? I'll try thar."

The hearts of the lovers, so long held in a suspense, almost agonising, began to beat more tranquilly as they saw him pass away from the spot.

It was but a short respite, lasting only the time occupied by Jerry Rook in taking ten steps.

A hound, beating about the field, had strayed up to

the tree and poked his snout into the cavity where they stood concealed.

A short, sharp yelp, followed by a growl, proclaimed the presence of something that ought not to be there.

"Yoicks! good dog!" cried the ci-devant hunter, quick harking to the cry. "What you got thar?"

Hastily returning to the tree, and stopping in front of the dark entrance, he continued—

"Somebidy inside thar? Who air it? Lena, gurl, is't you?"

Silence broken only by the baying of the hound.

"Hush up, you brute!" cried his master, driving off the dog with a kick. "Hear me thar, you inside! 'Tain't no good playin' possum. Ef it's you, Lena gurl, I command ye to come out."

Thus summoned, the girl saw it would be no use disobeying. It could serve no purpose, and would only end in her father stepping inside the cavity and dragging her angrily forth.

"I'll go," she whispered to her companion. "But stay you, Pierre, and don't stir! He'll think I'm alone."

Pierre had no chance to remonstrate, for on speaking the words, she stepped hastily out, and stood face to face with her father.

"So, so! I've foun' you at last, hev I? An' that's the hole in which ye war hidin', is it? Nice place that

for a young lady, as ye think yursel', at this time o' night! An' a nice party yer been hevin' clost to ye! Come, gurl! No denial o' what you've been doin'; but give an explanation o' yursel'! How kim ye to be hyar?"

"O, father! I was walking about. It was such a beautiful night, and I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd come out into the field and have a stroll down here to the old tree. I was standing under it when I saw them coming up—Alf Branden and the others—"

"Wal, go on!"

"I couldn't get back without their seeing me, and as I was afraid of them, I slipped inside the hollow."

"An' ye war thar all the time, war ye?"

"Yes; all the time."

"Wal, and what did yur hear?"

"A great deal, father. It'll take time to tell it all. If you'll come on into the house, I can repeat better what was said by them. I'm so frightened after what I heard, I want to get away from this horrid place."

It was a commendable stratagem to secure the retreat of her lover. Unfortunately it did not succeed. The old squatter was too cautious to be so easily deceived.

"O, yes," he said; "I'll go 'long wi' ye into the house; but not afore I've fust seed whether thar ain't somethin' else in the holler o' this tree."

His daughter trembled as he gazed towards the

entrance, but her trembling turned to a convulsive agony, as she heard the cocking of his rifle, and saw him point it towards the dark cavity in the trunk.

With a wild cry, she sprang forward, placing herself right before the muzzle of the gun.

Then, in the terrible agitation of the moment, forgetting all else, she shouted,

"Come out, Pierre, come out!"

"Pierre!" cried the furious father. "What Pierre?"

"Oh, father, it is Pierre Robideau!"

It was well Lena Rook had grasped the barrel of the rifle and turned it aside, else along with the last speech the bullet would have passed through the body of Pierre, instead of over his head.

But it was now too late, and Jerry Rook saw it.

The young man had sprung out, and was standing by his side.

Any attempt at violence on his part would have ended by his being dashed instantly to the earth. Beside Pierre Robideau he was like an old wasted wolf in the presence of a young, strong panther.

He felt his inferiority, and cowered upon the instant.

He even assumed the counterfeit of friendship.

"Oh, 'tair you, Pierre, is it? I wouldn't a knowed yer. It's so long since I've seed yer. You kin go in, gurl. I want to hev some talk wi' Pierre."

Lena looked as though she would have stayed. It was a look of strange meaning, but it wore off as she reflected that her lover could be in no danger now, and she walked slowly away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COMPANION.

FOR some seconds Jerry Rook stood in the shadow without saying a word, but thinking intensely.

His thoughts were black and bitter. The return of Pierre Robideau would be nothing less than ruin to him, depriving him of the support upon which for years he had been living. Once Buck, Brandon, and Co. should ascertain that he they supposed dead was still living, not only would the payment be stopped, but they might demand to be recouped the sums of which he had so cunningly mulcted them.

He had not much fear of this last.

If they had not actually committed murder, they would still be indictable for the attempt; and though, under the circumstances, they might not fear any severe punishment, they would yet shrink from the exposure.

It was not the old score that Jerry Rook was troubled about, but the prospect now before him. No more black mail; no money from any source; and Alf Brandon his creditor, now released from the bondage in which he had hitherto been held, spited by the rejection of yesterday, would lose no time in coming down upon him for the debt.

The quondam squatter saw before him only a feature of gloom and darkness—ejection from his ill-gotten home and clearing—a return to his lowly life—to toil and poverty—along with a dishonoured old age.

Mingling with these black thoughts, there was one blacker—a regret that he had not pulled the trigger in time!

Had he shot Pierre Robideau inside the tree all would have been well. No one would have known that he had killed him; and to his own daughter he could have pleaded ignorance that there was any one inside. Much as she might have lamented the act, she could scarcely have believed it wilful, and would have said nothing about it.

It was too late now. To kill the young man as he stood, in the darkness—it might still have been done—or even at a later time, would be the same as to murder him under the eyes of his daughter. From what she now knew the hand of the assassin could not be concealed.

These thoughts occupied Jerry Rook scarce any time. They came and passed like lightning that flashes deadly through dark clouds.

This prolonged silence was due to other thoughts. He was reflecting on what course he would take with the man, whose unexpected appearance had placed him in such a dilemma.

Turning to the latter, he at length spoke—

“How long ’ve ye been back, Pierre?”

The tone of pretended kindness did not deceive the returned gold-seeker.

“I came into the neighbourhood yesterday,” he replied, coldly.

“Have ye seed any one that know’d ye?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Ye’ll excuse me for bein’ a leetle rough wi’ ye. I war a bit flurried ’beout the gurl bein’ out, not knowin’ who she wur with. There’s a lot o’ fellars arter her, an’ it’s but right I shed be careful.”

Pierre could not object to this.

“Of course,” pursued Jerry, after another pause of reflection, “ye heerd all that passed atween me an’ that lot o’ diggers?”

“Every word of it.”

“An’ I suppose you know who they war?”

“Yes; I have good reason.”

“Yu’re right thar. Ye’ll be knowin’ then why this chile ain’t livin’ any more in the ole shanty, but in

a good, comf'table frame-house, wi' a clarin' rcun' it?"

"Yes, Jerry Rook, I think I understand that matter."

"Yur won't wonder, then, why I tuk so much pains, six years ago, to send yur out o' the way? No doubt yur did wonder at that?"

"I did; I don't now. It is all clear enough!"

"An' I reck'n it'll be equally clar to ye, thet yur comin' back ain't a gwine to do *me* any good. Jest ruins me, that's all."

"I don't see that, Jerry Rook."

"Ye don't! But this chile do. The minute any o' them six sets eyes on yur my game's up, an' thar's nothin' more left but clear out o' this, an' take to the trees agin. At my time o' life that ere 'll be pleasant."

"You mean that by my showing myself you would lose the six hundred dollars per annum I've heard you make mention of."

"Not only thet, but—I reckon I may as well tell yer—I am in debt to Alf Brandon, an' it war only by his believin' in your death I hev been able to stave it off. Now, Pierre Robideau!"

In his turn the gold-seeker stood reflecting.

"Well, Jerry Rook," he rejoined, after a time, "as to the black mail you've been levyin' on these six scoundrels, I have no particular wish to see them relieved o' it. It is but a just punishment for what they did to me, and to tell you the truth, it has, to some extent, taken

the sting out of my vengeance, for I had come back determined upon a terrible satisfaction. While serving yourself you've been doing some service to me!"

"May be," suggested the old pirate, pleased at the turn matters appeared to be taking, "may be Pierre, ye d like things to go on as they air, an' let me gi'e you more o' the same sort o' satisfackshun? Thar's a way o' doin' it, without any harm to yurself. It's only for you *to keep out o' sight.*"

Pierre was again silent, as if reflecting on the answer. He at length gave it.

"You speak truth, Jerry Rook. There is a way, as you've said; but it must be coupled with a condition."

"What condishun?"

"Your daughter."

"What o'her?"

"I must have her for my wife."

Rook recoiled at the proposal. He was thinking of Alf Brandon and the plantation, the grand estate he had so long coveted, and set his heart upon having.

On the other side were the six hundred dollars a year. But what was this in comparison? And coupled with a young man for his son-in-law, who was not even a full-blooded white—poor, perhaps penniless. No doubt he had come back without a dollar in his pocket.

Was this certain? He had been to California, the country of gold. From what could be seen of him in the dim light, he appeared well dressed, and his speech pro-

claimed him well instructed. He had certainly changed much from the time of his departure. He may not have returned either so fortuneless or friendless.

These conjectures kept Jerry Rook from making any immediate answer.

Taking advantage of his silence, the young man continued—

“I know, Jerry Rook, you will be wanting for your son-in-law some one with means; at least, enough to support your daughter in a decent position in society. I am fortunate enough to have this, obtained by hard toil, in the gold *placers* of California. If you wish satisfaction on this head, I can refer to the Pacific Banking Company of San Francisco, where, three years ago, I deposited my three year's gatherings—in all, I believe, about fifty thousand dollars.”

“Fifty thousand dollars! D'ye mean that, Pierre Robideau?”

“I mean it. If I had a light here, I could show you the proof of the deposit.”

“Come into the house, Pierre. I don't mean for a light. Ye'll stay all night? Thar's a spare bed; and Lena 'll see to your heving some supper. Come along in.”

The lucky gold-seeker made no opposition to the proffered hospitality; and in five minutes after he was seated by the fireside of the man who, but five minutes before, had been chafing at having lost the opportunity of spilling his blood!

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER EAVESDROPPER.

JERRY ROOK and his guest had scarce closed the door behind them, when a man, who had been skulking behind the cottonwood, came out into the front, and paused upon the spot they had abandoned.

He had been on the other side of the tree, from the time they had commenced their conversation, and heard it all.

The man was Alfred Brandon!

What had brought Alfred Brandon back to the cottonwood?

The explanation is easy enough.

The six resurrectionists did not go to Helena, as Jerry Rook had hinted they might do.

On getting out of Jerry's clearing, only five of them turned towards the town, Brandon going off towards his own home, which was not far off, in the opposite direction.

The planter, on parting with the others, instead of continuing homewards, sat down upon a stump by the side of the path, and taking out a cigar, commenced smoking it.

He had no particular reason for thus stopping on his way, only that after such a disappointment he knew he

could not sleep, and the cigar might do something to compose his exasperated spirit.

The night was a lovely one, and he could pass a half-hour upon the stump with reflections not more wretched than those that awaited him in his sleeping-chamber.

He was still within ear-shot of Jerry Rook's house, and he had scarce ignited his cigar, when a sound reached his ear from that direction.

It was the yelp of a hound, close followed by the animal's howling.

Soon after was heard the voice of a man speaking in harsh accents, and soon after this another voice—a woman's.

On the still silent night they were borne to Brandon's ears with sufficient distinctness for him to recognise them as the voices of Jerry Rook and his daughter.

It did not need either the angry accent of the one, nor the affecting tone of the other, to draw Alf Brandon to the spot.

Starting up from the stump, and flinging himself over the fence, he proceeded towards the place where the voices were still heard in excited and earnest conversation.

Had Brandon not feared discovering himself to the speakers, he might have been up in time to see Pierre Robideau step forth from the cavity of the tree, and Lena Rook protecting him from the wrath of her father.

But the necessity of approaching unobserved, by

skulking along the creek and keeping under cover of the canes, delayed him, and he only arrived behind the cottonwood as the young lady was being ordered into the house.

For Alfred Brandon, there was surprise enough without that. The presence of Pierre Robideau, whose name he had heard distinctly pronounced, with the sight of a tall form, dimly shaded under the tree, which he knew must be that of the *murdered* man, was sufficient to astonish him to his heart's content.

It had this effect; and he stood behind the cottonwood, whose shelter he had reached, in speechless wonder, trembling from the crown to the toes.

Though his fear soon forsook him, his wonder was scarce diminished, when the dialogue between Jerry Rook and Pierre Robideau furnished him with a key to the mysterious re-appearance of the latter upon the banks of Caney Creek.

"God a mercy!" gasped he, stepping from behind the huge tree trunk, and looking after them as they were entering the house. "Here's news for Messrs. Buck, Slaughter, Grubbs, Spence, and Randall! Glad they'll be to hear it, and at last get relief from their debts. This I reckon 'll cancel it.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, adding a fearful oath; "it's all very well for them, but what matters the money to me? I'd pay it ten times over and all my life to have that girl; and hang me if I don't have her yet for a wife or

for worse. Choc still alive and kicking! Cut down then before he got choked outright! Darned if I didn't more than half suspect it from the way old Rook talked about the burying of the body. The precious old pirate; hasn't he bilked us nicely?

"Mr. Pierre Robideau! yes that was the name, and this is the very fellow. I remember his voice, as if it were but yesterday. Missing for six years! Been to California! and picked up fifty thousand worth of yellow gravel! Lodged it in a bank, too, at San Francisco. No doubt going there again, and will be wanting to take Lena Rook along with him."

At this thought another fierce oath leaped from his lips, and the light of the fire-flies as they flitted past his face showed an expression upon it that might have done credit to the stage of a suburban theatre.

"Never!" he ejaculated. "Never shall *she* go, if I can find means to prevent it."

He stood for a time reflecting.

"There's a way," he again broke forth, "a sure way. Buck would be the man to lend a hand in it. He's crazed about the girl himself, and when he knows there's no chance for him, and thinks it's this fellow stands in the way; besides, he want's money, and wouldn't mind risking something to get it. Buck's the man!"

"If he don't I'll do it myself. I will, by the Eternal! I'd rather die upon the scaffold than this Indian should have her—he or any one else. I've been wild about

her for six years. Her refusing has only made me worse.

"There can't be much danger if one only gets the chance. He's been away once, and nobody missed him. He can go gold gathering again—this time never to return. He shall do it."

An oath again clinched the ambiguous threat.

Apparently relieved by having expressed his dark determination, he proceeded in a calmer strain.

"Won't they be glad to hear of this resurrection! I wonder if they're still at Slaughter's. They went there—sure to be there yet. I'll go. It'll make their hearts happier than all the liquor in the tavern. Good night, Jerry Rook! Take care of your guest. Next time he goes off it won't be by your sending of him."

After this sham apostrophe he struck off across the field, and, once more clambering over the fence, he took the road leading to Helena.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STRANGER GUEST.

THE fifth instalment of "hush-money," that had been paid to Jerry Rook, proved to be the last.

On meeting the contracting parties, and applying for the sixth, he found to his great surprise, as well as

chagrin, that the grand secret was gone out of his keeping, and his power over them at an end!

They were not only prepared to repudiate, but talked of his refunding, and even threatened to lynch him upon the spot.

So far from making his claim, he was but too glad to get out of their company.

It is probable they would have insisted upon the repayment, or put lynching in practice, but for fear of the scandal that either must necessarily create in the community. To this was Jerry indebted for his escape from their vengeful indignation.

"Who could have told them that Pierre Robideau still lived?"

This was the question put by Jerry Rook to himself, as he rode back to his house, filled with mortification. He asked it a score of times, amid oaths and angry ejaculations.

It could not have been Pierre himself, who was now his welcome guest, and had been so ever since the night of that strange rencontre under the cottonwood? Though the returned gold-seeker had strolled about the clearing, with Lena for a companion, he had never once gone beyond its boundaries, and could scarce have been seen by any outsider. No one—neighbour or stranger—had been near the house. The half-dozen negroes who belonged to Jerry Rook, had no previous acquaintance with Pierre Robideau's person; and, even had it been

otherwise, they would scarce have recognized him now. It was not through them the information had reached Alfred Brandon and his associates. Who, then, could have been the informer ?

For the life of him Jerry Rook could not guess ; and Pierre himself, when told of it, was equally puzzled upon the point.

The only conjecture at all probable, was, that some one had seen and identified him—one of the gang themselves ; or it might have been some individual totally uninterested, who, by chance, had seen and recognized him, soon after his arrival at the stand.

Now that his being alive was known to them, there was no longer any object in his keeping concealed ; and he went about the settlements as of yore, at times visiting the town of Helena, for the purchase of such commodities as he required.

He had taken up his stay at the house of his former host, and was so often seen in the company of his host's daughter, that it soon became talked of in the neighbourhood. Those who took any interest in the affairs of Jerry Rook's family were satisfied that his daughter, so long resisting, had at length yielded her heart to the dark-skinned, but handsome stranger, who was staying at her father's house.

There were few accustomed to have communication with either the quondam squatter or his people. It was a time when there were many new comers among the

surrounding settlements, and a stranger, of whatever kind, attracted but slight attention. Under these circumstances Pierre Robideau escaped much notice, and many remarks that might otherwise have been made about him.

There were more than one, however, keenly sensible of his existence—his success with Lena Rook—who saw with black bitterness that the smiles of that young lady were being bestowed upon him.

Bill Buck was among the number of these disappointed aspirants; but the chief sufferer was Alfred Brandon. With heart on fire, and bosom brimful of jealous rage, he heard all the talk about Jerry Rook's daughter and her stranger sweetheart.

It in no way tranquilized his spirits when Jerry Rook returned him his loan of stores and dollars, and promptly on the first demand. It but farther embittered it; for he could not help knowing whence the money had come. He saw that his wealth would no longer avail him. There would be no chance now of reducing the parent to that penury that would give him power over the child. His scheme had fallen through; and he set himself to the concoction of some new plan that would help him either to Lena Rook or revenge.

He spent nearly the whole of his time in reflecting upon his atrocious purpose—brooding over it until he had come to the determination of committing murder!

Several times he had thought of this, but on each

occasion had recoiled at the thought, less from horror of the crime itself, than through fear of the consequences.

He had half resolved to make common cause with Bill Buck, and induce him to become a confederate in the foul deed. But the doubtful character of the horse-dealer's son, each day getting darker, had scared him from entering into such a perilous partnership; and he still kept his designs locked up within his own troubled bosom.

Strange enough, Buck was at the same time entertaining in his own mind a scheme of assassination, and with the same victim in view.

Without suspecting it, Pierre Robideau was in double danger.

* * * *

It was about ten days after the returned gold-seeker had taken up his residence at the house of Jerry Rook, when an errand called him to the town of Helena. It was the mending of his bridle-bit, which had been broken by accident, and required to be half an hour in the hands of a blacksmith.

It was the bridle he had brought with him from the Choctaw country—an Indian article with reins of plaited horsehair—and as he had no other, it necessitated his going afoot.

In this way he started from Jerry Rook's house, leaving Jerry Rook's daughter at the door, looking lovingly after and calling him to come soon back.

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The distance was not great; and in less than an hour after he was standing in the blacksmith's shop, a tranquil spectator to the welding of his broken bit.

There was one who saw him there, whose spirit was less composed — one who had seen him entering the town, and had sauntered after at a distance, careless like, but closely watching him. This was not a citizen of the place; but a man in planter costume, who, by the spurs on his heels, had evidently ridden in from the country. In his hand he carried a rifle, as was common at the time to all going abroad, no matter to what distance, on horseback.

The man thus armed and accoutred was Alfred Brandon.

There were plenty of other people in the streets, and but few took note of him as he walked carelessly along. No one noticed the lurid light in his eye, nor the tight contraction of his lips that spoke of some dangerous design.

Much less were these indications observed by the man who was calling them forth. Standing beside the blacksmith's forge, quietly watching the work, Pierre Robideau had no thought of the eyes that were upon him, nor did he even know that Brandon was in the town.

Little dreamt he at that moment how near was a treacherous enemy thirsting for his blood.

Brandon's design was to pick a quarrel with the stranger, and before the latter could draw in his defence,

shoot him down in his track. In this there would be nothing strange for the streets of Helena, nor anything very reprehensible. Pierre was armed with knife and pistol, but both were carried unseen.

All at once the planter appeared to recoil from his purpose, and looking askant, he spent some time in surveying his intended victim, and as if calculating the chances of a rencontre. Perhaps the stalwart frame and strong vigorous arms of the *ci-devant* gold-seeker rendered him apprehensive about the issue, and caused him to change his resolution. The protruding breast of Pierre Robideau's coat told of pistol or other weapon, and should the first fire fail, his own life, and not that of his unsuspecting adversary, might be the forfeit in the affray.

While thus communing with his own mind, a still fouler thought came into it, kindling in his eye with more sinister lights.

Suddenly turning away, as if from some change of design, he strolled back along the street, entered the stable where he had left his horse, and, mounting inside the stable-yard, rode hastily out of the town.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A REVANCHE.

ABOUT half an hour after the planter had taken his departure from the house, Pierre Robideau paid for the mending of his bridle; and having no other errand to detain him in the town, started homewards afoot as he had come.

The road to Jerry Rook's house still corresponded with that leading to Little Rock, only that the latter, now much travelled, no longer passed through the well-known glade—a better crossing of Caney Creek having caused it to diverge before it entered the natural clearing.

The old trace, however, was that taken by any one going to Rook's house, and to it Pierre Robideau was making his return from the town.

With the bridle lashed belt-like across his shoulders, he was walking unsuspectingly along, thinking how pleased Lena Rook would be at seeing him so soon back.

On entering the glade a change came over his spirit, indicated by a dark cloud suddenly overspreading his face. It was natural enough at sight of that too well-remembered tree, recalling not only his own agonies, but the foul murder there committed, for he knew that upon

that same tree his unfortunate father, whom he could not think otherwise than innocent, had been sacrificed to the madness of a frantic mob.

There still was the branch extended towards him, as if mockingly to remind him of a vengeance still unsatisfied !

An impulse came over him he was unable to resist ; and yielding to it, he stopped in his track, and stood gazing upon the tree—a strange lurid light shining in his eyes.

All at once he felt a shock in the left arm, accompanied by a stinging sensation, as if from the bite of an insect ; but it was not this, for, almost at the same instant, he heard the “ spang ” of a rifle, and saw a puff of smoke flirting up over some bushes directly before him.

It was a shot that had been fired ; and the blood spirting from his torn coat-sleeve left no doubt of it having been fired at himself.

Nor could there be as to the deadly intention, though the damage done was only a slight abrasion of the arm, scarce deeper than the thickness of the skin.

Pierre Robideau did not stay to reflect on this. The moment he saw the smoke he sprang forward, and ran on until he had reached the spot where the bushes were still enveloped in the low, scattering, sulphurous vapour.

He could see no one there ; but this did not surprise him. It was not likely that such an assassin would stay to be discovered ; but he must still be near, stealing off among the trees.

Suspending his breath Pierre stood to listen.

For a time he could hear nothing, not even the rustling of a leaf, and he was beginning to fear that he might again be made the mark of an unseen murderer's bullet, when the screech of a jay came sharply through the trees.

It gave him instant relief, for he knew by the compressed scolding of the bird that some one was intruding upon its haunts. It must be the retreating assassin !

Guided by the chattering of the jay, he recommenced the pursuit.

He had not gone twenty yards farther when he heard footsteps, and the "swish" of leaves, as if some one was making way through the underwood. Directed by these sounds he rushed rapidly after.

Ten seconds more and he was in sight of a saddled horse, standing tied to a tree, and a man in the act of untying him. The man was making all haste, hindered by a heavy rifle carried in his hand. It was the gun that had just been discharged, and Pierre Robideau had recognised the man who had made the attempt to murder him.

Alfred Brandon !

With a shout, such as only one Indian-born could give, he bounded forward, and, before the retreating assassin could climb into his saddle, he seized him by the throat and dashed him against the trunk of a tree. The horse, frightened by the fierce onslaught, gave a loud neigh, and galloped off.

"I thank you," cried Robideau, "and you alone, Mr. Alf Brandon, for giving me this chance! I've got you exactly where I wanted you! For six years I've been longing for this hour, and now it has come as if I'd planned it myself."

Brandon, by this time recovered from the shock, threw down his gun, drew pistol, and was about to fire; but, before he could get his finger on the trigger, his antagonist seized him by the wrist, and, wrenching the weapon from his hand, dashed him a second time against the tree trunk.

Reeling and giddy, he saw the muzzle of his own pistol pointed at his head, and expected nothing else than the bullet through his brains.

The cry of the coward came from his lips as he writhed under the terrible anticipation.

To his astonishment the shot was not fired!

Pierre Robideau, flinging the pistol away, stood before him apparently unarmed!

"No, Mr. Alf Brandon!" said he, "shooting is too good for such a dog as you; and a dog's death you shall have. Come away from here! Come on! I want to see which of us can *hang longest by the hand*. We tried it six years ago, but the trial wasn't a fair one. 'Tis your turn now. Come on!"

More than ever astonished, Brandon hesitated to comply. The calm yet determined air of his antagonist told him it was no jest, but that something terrible was

intended. He glanced stealthily to the right and left, and seemed to calculate the chances of escape.

Robideau read his thoughts.

"Don't attempt it," said he, throwing back the lappel of his coat, and showing the butt of a pistol. "I have this, and will use it if you make any effort to get off. Come!"

Saying this, he seized the cowering ruffian by the wrist, and, half leading, half dragging, hurried him away from the spot.

In five minutes after they stood under a tree—the same upon which Pierre Robideau had endured all the horrors of hanging.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Brandon, in a faltering voice.

"I've told you. I am curious to see how long *you* can stand it."

As he said this, he unloosed the bridle-reins from his body, and, taking out his knife, commenced cutting them free from the bit. It was a double rein, composed of two long pieces of closely-plaited hair taken from the tail of a horse.

Brandon stood pale and trembling. He could not fail to interpret the preparations that were being made. Once more he thought of flight, and once more Pierre Robideau read his thoughts.

"It is no use," he said sternly; "you are in my power. Attempt to get out of it, or resist, and I dash your

brains out against that tree. Now, your wrist in this rope."

Feeble with fear, Brandon allowed his left hand to be seized, and his wrist drawn into a noose made of one of the bridle-reins. The other end of the cord was passed around his thigh, and then brought back and secured by a firm knot, so as to hold the arm helpless by his side. This done, the other rein, with a running loop, was adjusted round his neck, its loose end thrown over one of the large branches.

"Now," cried Robideau, "mount upon this log, and take hold, as you made me do. Quick, or I jerk you up by the neck!"

Bewildered, Brandon knew not what to do. Was his enemy in earnest, or was it only a grim jest? He would fain have believed it this; but the fierce, determined look of Robideau forbade him to hope for mercy. He remembered at this moment how little he was deserving of it.

He was left no time to reflect. He felt the noose tightening around his neck, and the cord stretching taut above him.

In another instant he was drawn from the ground and, mechanically throwing up his right arm, he caught hold of the branch. It was the only chance to save him from almost instant strangulation!

"Now," cried Robideau, who had sprung upon the log and made the rope fast to the upper limb, "now,

Mr. Alf Brandon, you're just as you left me six years ago. I hope you'll enjoy the situation. Good day to you!" And, with a scornful laugh, Pierre Robideau strode away from the spot.

* * * * *

All the agony that can be endured by a man who sees death before him, and sees no chance to escape it, was at that hour endured by Alfred Brandon.

In vain he shouted till he was hoarse, till his cries could have been no longer heard a hundred yards from the tree, soon to become his gallows. There was no response, save the echo of his own voice. No one to hear or to heed it! He had no expectation of being saved by the man who had just left him. That scornful laugh at parting precluded all hope: though in his agonised struggle he begged aloud for mercy, calling upon Pierre Robideau by name.

Pierre Robideau came not to his assistance; and, after a long struggle—protracted to the utmost point of endurance—till the arm, half disjoined, could no longer sustain his body, he let go his hold, and dropped—*to the ground.*

The peals of derisive laughter that rang in his ears as he lay exhausted upon the earth, were not pleasant—the less so that a female voice was heard taking part in it. But even this was endurable after the dread agony through which he had passed; and hurriedly springing to his feet, and releasing his neck from the rope, he

sneaked off among the trees, without staying to cast a look at Pierre Robideau or Lena Rook, who, standing by the edge of the glade, had been witness to his unnecessary contortions.

* * * * *

Our tale is told, so far as it might interest the reader. What afterwards happened to the different characters who have figured in it, were but events such as may occur in every-day life. There was nothing strange in a young man, with a taint of Indian blood in him, marrying the daughter of a backwoods-settler, and carrying her off to California; nothing strange, either, that the father of the girl should sell off his "improvement," and make the far-western migration along with them.

And this was the history of Jerry Rook, his daughter, and his daughter's husband; all three of whom, in less than twelve months after, might have been seen settled in their new home, on the far shore of the Pacific, and surrounded with every comfort required upon earth.

There Pierre Robideau had nothing further to fear from the hostility of early enemies, or the vengeance of jealous rivals; there Lena Rook, no longer exposed to social humiliation, had the opportunity of becoming that for which nature had intended her—an ornament of society; and there, too, her father found time to repent of the past, and prepare himself for that future which awaits alike the weary and the wicked.

Of his crimes, both committed and conceived, Jerry Rook died repentant.

The fate of Alfred Brandon was somewhat similar to that of his father. Drink brought him to a premature grave; though, unlike his father, he died without heir and almost without heritage, having spent the whole of his property in the low dissipation of the tavern and the gaming-table. His executors found scarce sufficient to pay for the hearse that carried him to the grave.

With Bill Buck it was different. His funeral, which occurred shortly after, was at the public expense—his grave being dug near the foot of the gallows on which he had perished for many crimes committed against society, the last and greatest being a cold-blooded murder, with robbery for its motive.

Spencer, Slaughter, Randall, and Grubbs, lived to take part in the late fratricidal war—all four, as might be expected, embracing the cause of secession, and all, it is believed, having perished in the strife, after the perpetration of many of those cruel atrocities in which the state of Arkansas was most conspicuously infamous.

Helena still stands on the banks of the mighty river, and there are many there who remember the tragedy of Dick Tarleton's death; but few, if any, who have ever heard the tale of "THE HELPLESS HAND."

THE FALCON ROVER.

THE FALCON ROVER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISCOVERY.

A mystery ! By heaven, I'll find it out,
If a man may !—*The Maiden.*

Speed, Malise, speed !—*Lady of the Lake.*

ONE of the most lovely pictures in lowland scenery which I have ever looked upon is that around the mouth of a river which I have called the Clearwater (the English translation of its Indian name), and which flows between two of the southern counties of the western shore of Maryland.

From the northern shore of that stream, in this place wide and beautiful, stretches out a long, flat strip of white sand, which is covered here and there with patches of crab-grass, and of that kind of cactus commonly called the prickly pear. On the western side of this strip of sand is a deep and capacious harbour, much

resorted to by bay-craft and sea-going vessels, while waiting for a fair wind up or down the bay. On its eastern side extends a gulf, or indentation of the coast, called by sailors, if I remember rightly, Patuxent Roads, and which expands towards, and mingles with, the broad and beautiful Chesapeake. Along the shores of this gulf are shoals, famous in the country round as resorts of the fish called drums, which circumstance has given the name of Drum Point to the beach extending, as described, between the Clearwater and Maryland's noble bay.

On the northern side of Drum Point harbour, and near to where the point begins to curve away from the mainland, stood, during the second decade of this century (and, indeed, for many years afterwards), a long, single-story frame building. This building, though placed upon the sands, was still many yards away from the highest line reached by the water at high tide. Directly behind it the land rose with a rapid swell to a plateau, some thirty or forty feet above the shore of the harbour. This frame structure was what is called in the United States a store, and contained for sale such articles as are most in demand among seamen. It belonged to an individual whom, for many reasons, I will call by a fictitious name, Ashleigh, and who owned an estate of several hundred acres, embracing all the eastern line of the harbour shore, and extending some distance into the country behind it.

At the time of which I write, mysterious and very

injurious stories, about the owner of this store, circulated in the neighbouring country on both sides of the Clearwater. It was said that he concealed smuggled goods, and even goods captured by pirates on the high seas, until an opportunity should occur for secretly conveying them to Baltimore for sale; and that he was implicated in some way in the trials for piracy held before one of the United States courts in Baltimore, in the early part of the present century.

At about half-past twelve o'clock, on a night towards the end of May, in the year 1817, three human figures stood upon the hill-side, overlooking Drum Point harbour. The principal form in the group was that of John Alvan Coe, a handsome young man of twenty-one or twenty-two years of age, tall, and well proportioned. When seen in the day-time, his clear blue eyes, Roman nose, and light chestnut hair, indicated a sanguine but gentle character, and one endowed with dauntless courage, controlled by a reflective mind. This young gentleman, the son of a planter in the neighbourhood, once wealthy, but now much reduced in worldly circumstances, was returning from his sport of night-fishing for drums, accompanied by two sturdy negro men, who bore between them, suspended upon a po'e, the ends of which rested upon their shoulders, a large basket, heavily laden with the scaly trophies of their recent sport.

Young Coe, while passing on his way to the fishing, about sunset, along the hill-side on which he now stood,

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had noticed, among the two or three vessels in Drum Point harbour, a beautiful brig of about a hundred and twenty tons burden. She was remarkable among the other vessels for her graceful figure, and the neat and trim appearance of everything on board of her. On his return from the fishing, after leaving his boat hauled up on the beach of a small cove on the east side of Drum Point, his path lay across the low and sandy neck of land connecting the point with the mainland, and then in a gradual ascent along the green hill-side overlooking the harbour. While pursuing this path he had halted, with his companions, in a position from which he could view to the best advantage the fair and romantic scene which lay before him.

The moon, which was at its full, shed a softly brilliant silvery light over land and water. Away towards the west spread the beautiful lake-like expanse of the river—above five miles in length by two miles in width—which is bounded northward and southward respectively by the counties before referred to, eastward by Drum Point, and westward by the long, slender and curving, and still more lovely Point Patience. The waters of this fair expanse, softly stirred by a light breeze, gleamed with myriads of lights and shadows under the moonlight spell. The front of the low bluffs on the St. Mary's side of the river, and the broad beach of sand beneath them, glowed softly white in the beautiful light.

It was impossible that one endowed with the temperament of John Alvan Coe could avoid, although constantly accustomed to scenes of natural beauty, allowing his gaze to rest for a moment upon the charming view before him. His attention was soon arrested, however, by something which was occurring in the harbour under the hill on which he stood. The only vessel remaining there was the beautiful brig which he had noticed at sunset. Three boats, apparently heavily laden, had left the brig and were coming towards the shore. Soon afterwards the young man saw a light shining out from one of the back windows of the storehouse on the beach.

There were some peculiarities in the character, or rather mental constitution, of young Coe, with which it is necessary that I should acquaint the reader, before we proceed farther in the narrative, of the remarkable series of occurrences which arose to him out of the incidents of this night. He not only loved danger for its own sake, but was endowed with great fondness for romantic and stirring adventures. He had a great and at times irresistible curiosity to investigate whatever presented the appearance of darkness and mystery. In childhood this peculiarity had mainly exhibited itself in a fondness for unravelling riddles and conundrums; in more advanced youth, by solving, with great patience and industry, the most difficult problems in mathematics. The penetration of the meaning of the movement of the

boats from the brig at such an hour irresistibly called to mind, as it did, the mysterious reports of smugglers and pirates in connection with this place, presented an especial fascination to a mind constituted as was his. His resolution was immediately formed to discover, at all hazards, the meaning of what was taking place beneath him.

It should have been mentioned before, perhaps, that the hill-side above the harbour was covered, to a great extent, with a growth of bushes, with a tree here and there. It was under one of the latter, whose dense shadow hid them from the view of those in the boats, that the fishing-party stood, while young Coe was making the observations recorded above. As soon as he formed the resolution already mentioned, the young man addressed the two negro men—

“Boys,” he said, “take up the basket”—they had put it down to rest themselves—“and go on. I shall follow you very soon. But do not wait for me, even though I should not overtake you before you get home.”

The two negroes resumed their load and again started on their path. The young man waited until they had passed out of sight over the hill, and until the boats had landed and the men belonging to them had, after a number of trips between the boats and the storehouse, transferred all the lading to the latter, and themselves remained under its roof. He then cautiously descended the hill, concealing himself as much as possible by inter-

posing, whenever he could do so, the bushes between himself and the shore. In a few minutes he arrived beneath the window of the store-room from which the light that he had before observed was still shining.

Guardedly he looked in. The counter had been entirely removed from its place, revealing a long and narrow opening in the floor, and steps leading downwards. Silks and other costly dry goods, and a number of boxes and other closed packages, were piled on the counter and floor. A lamp, casting a bright light, stood upon the counter, and another light shone from an opening in the floor; and men were seen carrying the merchandise into the cellar to which the steps below the floor led, and returning at short intervals for more. Two or three other men were standing on the floor of the store-room; one or the other of whom seemed, from time to time, to be giving directions to those who were removing the piles of goods to the apartment below.

There was a tall and handsome man on the side of the room opposite to the window at which young Coe was standing, who leaned against the closed door which looked, when opened, upon the river. This man wore a dark dress, and a black hat with a broad slouched brim, which threw a dense shadow over the upper part of his countenance. The long black beard from his unshaven face reached half way from his chin to his waist. This man did not speak, except to make a remark now and

then to the two or three men who were not engaged in removing the goods.

Among all the men whom young Coe saw, there was not one whom he recognised as having been seen by him before. If Mr. Ashleigh himself was engaged in what was taking place, he must have been in the cellar.

John Alvan Coe had barely time to make the observations recorded above, when the tall and quiet individual, who was leaning against the closed door, beckoned to a man near him, to whom he made some remarks in a low tone. This man immediately spoke to the others who were standing about on the floor of the store room. Instantly all in the room who were not engaged in removing the goods—except the long-bearded man who wore the slouched hat, and who, with a motion not at all hurried, opened for them the door against which he had been leaning—sallied forth upon the sands.

The young man waited for no further development. Supposing very naturally, what was the case, that he had been discovered, and that this party were sent in pursuit of him, he immediately turned away from the window and plunged into the pathway leading up the hill towards Mr. Ashleigh's residence. No action, under the circumstances, could have shown the quick perception and ready decision of his mind to more advantage than his at once taking to this pathway; for, after he was once seen by his pursuers, his concealing himself amongst the few trees and scattered clumps of bushes along the hill-side would

have been no safeguard under the almost daylight brightness of the clear moonlight.

Such a course would have given to his pursuers only a limited space of ground to search over at their leisure, with the absolute certainty of discovering his place of concealment and making him prisoner. His taking the plain pathway to the hill-top made his escape depend upon his fleetness of foot, but only for a short distance ; the hill once surmounted, a dense forest spread for miles along the route which he had to pursue. He had no uneasiness or doubt in trusting to his speed ; for, inured by daily exercise, he had long been considered the boldest leaper and fleetest runner in all the country side.

CHAPTER II.

THE PURSUIT.

HAHN. My lord, he has escaped.

OTTO. Have thou no fear ; he shall be prisoner.

I know the bird, his ways, where he frequents ;

And I shall lime a twig, upon the which

I'll easily entice him to alight.—*Oldenheim.*

THE noise of the footsteps passing out of the door brought from the cellar a tall and slender elderly man, with black eyes, and dark hair thickly interspersed with

grey. This individual seemed to be in a state of much excitement.

"What is the matter, Captain Vance?" he asked.
"What has happened?"

"Nothing of much importance," answered the dark man with the black slouched hat, who was again leaning, as when first seen by John Alvan Coe, against the door, which opened upon the sands. "I caught sight of a man looking in upon us just now through the back window."

"Do you consider that fact as of not much importance?" said the elderly man from the cellar. "If you were in my position, I think that you would entertain a different opinion."

"Oh!" exclaimed the captain in a careless manner,
"he was only

'A chiel amang us takin' notes.'

I am very sure that he will never 'prent 'em.' I shall take especial pains that he shall never have a chance of doing so."

"The men who went out just now then," remarked the elderly man, in an interrogative manner, "were sent to catch him?"

"Yes," was the laconic reply.

"God grant that they may catch him!" exclaimed the grey-headed man, in an earnest tone.

"If I were you, I would not call upon God in such a case," said Captain Vance, whose coolness and self-

possession afforded a complete contrast to the excitement and alarm conspicuous in the bearing of his elder companion. "You had better turn your face downward than upward when you call for help; for you are more likely to have sympathy, in the present business, from the powers below than from the powers above. If prayer is the longing of the heart rather than the speech of the lips—as I heard the man who was looking in at the window say a year or so ago—you would have more chance for help by praying to the devil, Mr. Ashleigh; that is, if his infernal majesty should think that any more assistance to you is needed to buy you."

"It is evident, captain," retorted Mr. Ashleigh, "that you are now in one of your philosophical moods, as Billy Bowsprit calls them. I cannot see, however, that, even in the view of our relative positions which you are now taking, you have any advantage of me. I have long been familiar with the saying that 'the receiver is as bad as the thief;' but I have never heard, if my memory serves me rightly, that the receiver is worse than the thief."

"Nevertheless, I have the advantage of you," quietly answered Captain Vance. "I do not pretend to be any better than I am; I do not 'wear the livery of heaven to serve the devil in.'"

"Not in 'your vocation, Hal,'" said Mr. Ashleigh; "that is, not here, on shipboard; but at home you are, I am sure, just as much a hypocrite as I am."

"There is some pith in that retort," replied Captain Vance, in a somewhat yielding tone. "Ah! we are all more or less hypocrites, Mr. Ashleigh; as the poet says, 'we are all shadows to each other.'"

"Besides," continued Mr. Ashleigh, "nobody in this neighbourhood would recognise you in that disguise and by this light; whereas, this building is known to belong to me, and the discovery of the business which is carried on here would, therefore, ruin me."

"Pardon the lightness of my manner of speaking," said the young man, in an earnest tone of voice. "My real reason for speaking so was not on account of want of concern in your interests, but because there is, in fact, no danger to you, or to any one of us, in any discovery made by the individual who just now peeped in upon us."

"I think that you intimated, a few moments ago," remarked Ashleigh, "that you know the person who was reconnoitering us. Who is he?"

"John Alvan Coe," was the answer; "son of old Mr. Coe, who owns a plantation at the head of St. John's Creek, a few miles from this place."

"Then I am lost," exclaimed Ashleigh, in increased alarm. "No man in this county—I may say in this State—can surpass him in ferreting out a secret, when once he has obtained a hint of it."

"I am as familiar with that peculiarity in his character as you are," remarked Captain Vance. "But I have

a plan partly formed in my head, which, I am almost sure, will not only render him harmless, but will also add a very brave and intelligent member to my ship's company. I have but little hope that those who have gone in pursuit of him will overtake him. He is the fleetest runner that I ever knew ; and sailors make but poor comparative headway on land."

"What is your plan ?" asked Ashleigh.

"It is not yet perfectly formed," answered Vance.

"It is still in the crucible of the brain ; and I cannot tell what shape it will take until it has come out complete."

"You had better be in a hurry then," said the elder speaker. "There is but little time to act ; when he has once told what he has witnessed here to another, the information will spread and spread, and there will be no stopping it. And then the consequences—ah ! 'that way madness lies.'"

"Feel no uneasiness," said Captain Vance, in a tone of perfect confidence. "He shall take his breakfast on board of the *Falcon* to-morrow morning."

"It is some relief to me to hear you speak so confidently," remarked Ashleigh. "Still I cannot help fearing that trouble will grow out of this thing. I wish that my advice in one respect had been followed, and that we had waited for a few days, until the moon will set before daylight, so that we might have had an hour or two of absolute darkness for our work."

"I have before represented to you," replied Captain

Vance, "that we should have run still greater risk by such a course, perhaps have had the revenue officer down upon me, while I had all these men on board, and such a quantity of goods for which I have no bill of lading. What suspicions would have been aroused by my lingering round here for a week at least, with no excuse on account of stress of weather for the delay!"

"Well," observed Ashleigh, with an uneasy sigh, "there is some force in what you say; and it is too late now to discuss the matter."

"Oh!" said Vance, in a light and cheerful manner, "there is no need of sighing, I assure you. This affair of young Coe does not disturb me at all. It only determines me to do at once what I have often thought of undertaking. I have no doubt, as I said before, that it will only result in adding a new and unusually valuable member to our force. He is remarkably intelligent, and as brave as a lion."

"I hope that your impressions may prove correct," remarked Ashleigh, in a manner that still expressed uneasiness.

At this moment the door was opened from the outside, giving entrance to a male individual of a somewhat comical appearance. He was rather under five feet in height, and was what is called "square built," that is, his form and limbs were very stout, or rather, perhaps, thick; and his waist was nearly as wide as his shoulders or his hips. His hair was of a reddish-brown or tawny

colour, of exuberant growth, and worn in long, clustering curls which swept his shoulders. His face was deeply tanned by sun and weather; and the scar of a sabre-cut above his left eye caused the eyebrow on that side to be below the line of its fellow. The eyes were of a reddish hazel colour, and their expression showed that their possessor had an appreciation of the humorous, but that there was also "a lurking devil" in his composition. He was dressed in the ordinary sailor costume of that as well as of the present period, of blue cloth roundabout, with many small brass buttons, coarse Osna-burg trowsers, considerably soiled, light pumps, and a tarpaulin hat.

"Well, Billy," said the captain, "what luck?"

"No luck at all, as far as I am concerned," was the answer. "A short, broad-beamed lugger like me has no more chance of overhauling a trim, well-rigged craft like that long-legged fellow, who has been taking liberties with our harmless secrets, than a Dutch drogger has to beat upon a wind a Baltimore clipper."

Baltimore was even then, the reader will recollect, famed for the fleetness of her vessels.

"Where are the other two?" asked Captain Vance.

"I don't know, indeed, captain," replied Billy. "When I got to the top of the hill they were all hull down; and I thought that I had better steer for port before I had lost all my bearings. So here I am. I think, by-the-bye, that that long-legged fellow will get the weather-

gage of all of them. Do you know his name, captain ? ”

Billy was a privileged character with his captain, who, in fact, was generally more familiar with his men than is usual with officers in chief command.

“ Yes,” answered Captain Vance ; “ his name is Coe.”

“ That’s just the very name for him,” said the sailor. “ I have often heard that, in the merchant-houses, ‘ Co.’ sometimes stands for more than one man ; and I know that this fellow is fully equal to two. Indeed, I think that he’ll prove himself too much for all of us to-night. He runs like a clipper before the wind.”

The door again opened, and two seamen entered, both dressed in costumes similar to that of the last-comer before them. One was evidently a common sailor ; the other was a stout, compactly-built man, about five feet six or seven inches in height, of a swarthy complexion, with dark and lowering eyes, and a generally stern and forbidding expression of countenance. His dark hair, somewhat mingled with grey, was, contrary to the usual sailor fashion, cut closely to his head ; but he wore all of his grizzly, straight, and uncurling beard long. He seemed to be about forty years of age.

This man interlarded his talk with many oaths of the rudest character. I prefer to omit them in reporting his conversation.

“ Well, Mr. Afton,” said Captain Vance, in a pleasant

tone, addressing this individual, "where is your prisoner?"

"Prisoner?" was the rough answer. "I once was told of a man who was such a fool as to undertake to run a race with the moon; but he had a sight more chance of winning his race than we had of winning ours. We overtook, in the pursuit, two stupid negroes carrying a load of fish. I thought that they had probably seen him, and could, therefore, give us some information with regard to our chase; but though I cut some tough hickory rods, and they were both well thrashed, we could get nothing out of them."

"That was useless, to say the least of it," said the captain, with some sternness. "Of course, if they had seen him, they would have told you without having been cruelly beaten."

Mr. Afton indulged himself in a few more oaths, and a heavy frown came upon his face. The captain seemed to take but little notice, however; and there was silence for a few moments. This silence was broken by Mr. Afton.

"If I knew who that spying fellow is, and where he lives, captain," he said, with more respect in his tones and manner, "I would, with your consent, take a few of the men, storm the house, capture him, and bring him aboard."

"I know the man," replied Captain Vance, "and also where he is to be found. But there is no need

of resorting to the violent means which you recommend—which, by-the-bye, would destroy our trade here, by making it unsafe for us to visit this harbour or its neighbourhood any more. I think that I have a better plan. I know well the character of the man who was watching us, and since you started in pursuit of him, have thought of a plan by which I shall have him peaceably on board of the brig early to-morrow morning, before he shall have an opportunity of communicating with any one. Trust the matter to me; I feel not the least doubt of my success. I will speak to you further on the subject presently.”

From the time that Afton, Billy, and the other sailor had gone in pursuit of young Coe, the process of removing the bales and boxes of goods to the cellar had been unremittingly continued. Soon after Billy Bow-sprit's return, Mr. Ashleigh had gone down into the cellar again, to resume the superintendence of the storage of the merchandise. Shortly after the close of the conversation recorded above, between the captain and the first-mate, the merchant reascended to the store-room, and announced that the goods were all safely put away. He was followed by the sailors who had been engaged in carrying down the packages.

“Come, boys,” said the storekeeper, addressing those who had come with him out of the cellar; “let us put the slide and the counter back into their places, and put the store-room again in order. Our night's work

will then be finished. I, for one, shall be glad of it, for I am both tired and sleepy."

In a few moments afterwards, and while Captain Vance was holding a short, whispered conversation with Mr. Afton, his first-mate, the doors and windows of the store-room were made fast. Then the merchant took his way up the hill to his house, and the seafaring people, all but one, returned to the brig.

CHAPTER III.

THE EARLY VISITOR.

TELER. 'Tis a brave venture, our good master Jansen,
And needs a man of pluck to carry it.

JANSEN. Danger, say you? and mystery to back it!
Say no more, Teler—I'm the man for you.—*Old Drama.*

MILLMONT, the residence of Thomas Coe, Esq., on his plantation of the same name, near the head of St. John's creek, was a large, two-story frame building, with single-story wings. Each of these wings contained one room, with an attic above, and was connected with the main building by a short and narrow passage or entry. In one of these wings was the chamber of John Alvan Coe. It was a large room, with windows sheltered by Venetian blinds, and opening almost to the floor. A large

yard, shaded by several old trees, extended from the front of the house and from the gables of the wings; the garden, in the usual fashion when attached to plantation houses of that time, was on the fourth side, or in the rear of the buildings.

John Alvan Coe not only escaped from his pursuers, but arrived home before the two negro men who had accompanied him. He at once entered his room, and in a few moments—having first loaded his pistols and placed them on a table near the head of his bed, and having seen that the window-shutters were all made fast—sprung into bed, and was soon deep in that sound and refreshing sleep which fatigue always assures to healthy youth.

About four o'clock, or at the earliest "peep of day," the young man was aroused from his slumbers by a light, grating noise, made by running a stick or a finger down along the outside of the Venetian shutters of one of the windows of his room. He immediately started from his sleep.

"Who is there?" he exclaimed.

"Get up, John, and let me in, quickly," said a voice from the outside of the window. "I have something interesting to tell you."

"Is that you, Harry Marston?" asked John. "Wait a moment till I get on some of my clothes."

In a few minutes the early visitor was admitted into the chamber. It was, as John had supposed, Henry

Marston, the son of a wealthy planter in the neighbourhood. Being of an adventurous and roving disposition, he had been unwillingly allowed by his parents, some years before, to enter upon a seafaring life. He had risen rapidly in his chosen profession, and was now captain of the *Sea-bird*, a merchant vessel in which his father owned an interest, and which was engaged in trading between Baltimore and certain ports in the West Indies and along the Spanish main.

Young Marston was tall and handsome. His hair and the slight moustache which shaded his upper lip were of dark brown hue. His dark, hazel eyes were expressive, at the first glance, of both gentleness and resolution; but a second, and more observant look, discovered something more in them—a something that created uneasiness and a want of trust. Every movement of his body seemed instinct with grace. His voice was soft and musical, but it did not at all remind you of the singing of birds or of the tones of other cheerful and innocent creatures. Still, there was a peculiar fascination in his speech and manner, which possessed a great influence over certain natures. The young man was on this occasion dressed in a handsome suit of black broadcloth.

“How are you, Harry?” exclaimed John, as soon as his visitor entered the room. “This is, indeed, a surprise, and a delightful one. When did you get back home?”

“Last night,” was the answer, “or, rather, I should

say this morning, since it was fully one o'clock when I got home. Everybody was aroused from sleep by my arrival; and the old folks insisted upon dressing and coming down to see me at once. All the little ones, too, came out of their nests to see the long-absent Harry. Thus, it was nearly three o'clock before I got a chance of retiring to my chamber, by which time the excitement of seeing so many loved ones banished from me all weariness and inclination to sleep. And this brings me to the cause of my so early visit to you."

"In the delight of seeing you," said John, "I had forgotten that subject entirely."

"When I entered my chamber," continued Henry Marston, "I found upon the floor, directly in front of the door by which I had come in, this singular and enigmatical card, enclosed in an envelope directed to my address—'Captain Henry Marston, Blue Oldfields'—the name of my father's place, you know. Remembering your fondness for adventure—we are alike in that respect, in truth—I came over here at once, to ask your assistance in developing the mystery. There is no time for delays, you see, as to-day is the twenty-first."

The young sailor handed to his friend a card, on which was written, in letters imitating print, these words:

May 21st, 1817, at 5-12 A.M.,

AT THE SPOUT.

The number is EIGHT.

BE PROMPT—BE TRUE.

Forget not the Pass.

"A. F. E."

"What do you want to do?" asked John, after reading the words on the card. "I can make but little meaning out of this."

"Why, of course," replied Marston, "I want you to go with me to this rendezvous. I am determined to find out the mystery. You see, there will be eight there—seven besides myself; at any rate, that is what I understand the card to mean. If anything be wrong, I can scarcely hope to contend successfully against seven men. At an hour so early, few upon whom I could call for help will be about—probably not one at that lonely place. Yet I am determined, at all hazards, to solve the mystery. If you think there is too much risk in the affair, John, I will go by myself."

"As to that matter," said John, "you know that I don't care about the risk, as you call it; so that if you are determined to go I will accompany you. But the affair may be only a joke; and I don't wish to do anything that will make me the subject of laughter."

"It may be a joke to try my courage," observed Marston. "In any view of the case," he continued, after a pause, "I am determined to make the venture."

"And I shall accompany you," said John. "The place designated, I suppose, is the Spout on St. Leonard's Creek?"

"Of course it is," was the answer. "There is no other place in this neighbourhood called the Spout."

"But my going with you," said John, reflectively, "may be the very cause of danger to you, since I have received no card of invitation. By the way, what is that piece of paper on the floor behind you near the door. Bless my life!" he continued, picking up the paper; "it is addressed to me, and contains, word for word, a card like the one addressed to you."

"You will go now, I suppose, unhesitatingly," said Captain Marston.

"Certainly," was the reply. "But I had better awaken one of the servants, and leave a message for the family."

"There is no use in doing that," said Henry. "I left no message at home. We shall be back, in all probability, by the time they are up. Have you not a pair of pistols? I remember that we each bought, in Baltimore, a pair precisely alike, during my last visit home. We should go well armed, and in that condition, I think, as we are both good shots, and not at all nervous, that we shall be very nearly, if not quite, a match for the other six."

"My pistols," answered young Coe, "are here on the table, and ready for use. I loaded them immediately on my return from a drum-fishing excursion last night, on account of an adventure which befell me on my way home. This card may have something to do with that adventure."

"Ah! What is that adventure to which you refer?"

asked Captain Marston, with much expression of interest.

While young Coe was relating to his friend the incidents of the night, he was also engaged in dressing. During the process of dressing, while young Coe's eyes were turned for a moment or two away from Marston, the latter took up the pistols which had been lying upon the table, and placed them in his pockets, and immediately afterwards put upon the table in their place another pair of pistols which were precisely similar in appearance to the former, and which he had withdrawn from another pair of pockets in his dress."

"What befell you last night," remarked the captain, when John had concluded his narrative, "can have nothing to do with the present affair, because they could not have recognised you under the circumstances; and, besides, I should not have received a card as well as you, since I had nothing to do with that adventure."

"True," replied John. "Yet I may have been recognised; who knows but that one or more persons of this neighbourhood who knows me are engaged in this smuggling business, and were there disguised? Moreover, the card sent to you also may be intended to put me off my guard."

"If you feel any uneasiness about the matter," said Captain Marston, "you had better, perhaps, not go. I shall go, however, at all risks."

"Oh!" exclaimed John, in an easy tone; "my think-

ing the affair a plot will not prevent me from trying to discover its meaning. If it be a trap to catch me, that trap is well set ; for what is more apt to draw one on to adventure than mystery, especially when that mystery is awaited on by apparent peril ? I am determined to solve the riddle, let it be attended by what danger it may be."

"Come, then," said the captain, "are you ready ? If so, let us go at once. Time is pressing."

The two men then left the house, and proceeded to the stable, where John soon saddled two horses for the ride. Mounting, they rode slowly, for fear of disturbing the sleep of the household, down a land bordered with old cherry-trees, which led from the dwelling at Millmont to the public road at the distance of a few hundred yards ; but on gaining this road their horses were urged to a fast gallop.

The daylight was now shining broad and bright, although there was nearly half an hour to sunrise. The sky was softly blue, and clear of clouds, save a few light and fleecy ones, which sailed slowly along, seemingly far away in the depths of ether. "A dewy freshness filled the air," which was cool and bracing, and made sweet by the fragrant breath of grasses and leaves, and of the humble wild flowers which grew on either side of the road.

The stimulating character of the atmosphere, and the elastic motion of their steeds, stirred the blood of the

young men to a more rapid circulation, and aroused them to a full enjoyment of the adventure in which they were engaged.

“What a strange and inexpressible pleasure there is in danger!” said John. “There seems to me to be no enjoyment in life, unless there be obstacles to overcome, and perils to meet.”

“I agree with you,” said Captain Marston. “But it requires caution as well as courage to win for us in the battle of life. Has it occurred to you that we have not the password to admit us to the rendezvous?”

“No,” replied John. “But what is the use of it? We have received cards of invitation, and we know the place and hour of meeting.”

“So we do,” said Marston; “yet a want of knowledge of this password may give us inconvenience as well as trouble.”

“Probably,” suggested Coe, “the letters ‘A. F. E.’ are the password.”

“But,” objected Captain Marston, “perhaps they are only the initials of it; and in that case, the question arises, what do they stand for? It is well to be armed against all contingencies.”

“True,” consented John. “But I am sure I have no idea what they can mean. Let me think for a minute or two.”

“Don’t you remember,” asked Marston, “the English story, which we read together when we were schoolboys,

about a mysterious secret society? Can you recollect the initials of their password?"

"Yes," was the ready reply; "they are 'O. F. A.—A. F. O.,' which, being interpreted, mean 'One for All, All for One.' Let me see! 'A. F. E.' All for each. I wonder if that is not the password in this case?"

"Very probable," assented Marston. "If necessary, let us try it, at all events."

This proposition was agreed to.

As the distance between Millmont and the Spout, over a road which traversed, in rapidly succeeding alternations, fields and forests, hills and plains, was fully nine miles, the two young men were obliged to put their horses to a tolerably high speed to reach the place of their destination in time. But little more conversation passed between them, therefore, until they arrived at the head of the ravine, down which their road led to the shore of St. Leonard's Creek.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE SPOUT.

OSSARIO. Stand, ho ! Who are you ?

ANTONIO. We are true men, sir.

OSSARIO. True men, give the word—and pass.—*Old Play.*

WALTER. Only a pleasant jest, I do assure you.—*The Sorry Joke.*

WHEN the two men descended the ravine leading to the shore, the sun was half an hour above the horizon. Before they left the mouth of the ravine, they dismounted, at the suggestion of Captain Marston, and fastened their horses to the drooping branches of a tree which grew by the side of the road. The animals were, in this situation, out of sight of the place of rendezvous. The companions having thus made their horses secure, advanced to the shore.

The novelist, and even the poet, could find no lovelier locality, ready created for the scenes of fancied grief and pleasures, than that contained within lines embracing St. Leonard's Creek and its immediate adjuncts. Not only is the stream itself—especially in the fair expanse near its junction with the river, which is now supposed to lie glowing and dimpling in the morning sunshine, with varying lights and shadows, before the

reader's mental eyes—remarkably beautiful; but all around it—every hill and dale, every field and grove, every jutting promontory and retiring cove—partakes of the same character of pre-eminent loveliness.

On the southern side of the expanse mentioned is a broad beach of white sand. From the side of a cliff which towers above this beach flows a fountain of water, very pure, clear, and cold, and equally abundant at all seasons of the year. This fountain is known throughout a large district of surrounding country as the Spout, and is some fifty yards from the spot where the road, leading down the ravine before-mentioned, enters upon the sands.

Just as Captain Marston and John Coe stepped upon the shore, and were turning to the left hand to seek the fountain, a short and stout man, about forty years of age, with long, curling locks of reddish brown hair, and a face very darkly tanned by sun and breeze, and, probably, by battle, too—to judge by the marks upon his countenance—presented himself before them.

“Stand!” exclaimed this individual, planting himself directly in front of the two young men, and presenting a cocked pistol in each hand.

“We’ll see about that,” said John Coe, sternly, drawing a pistol also.

But Captain Marston placed a hand upon the arm of the angry young man.

“Don’t be so fast, John,” he said. “Don’t you see

the twinkle in the fellow's eyes? I am disposed to believe that this is but a jest after all. What do you want?" he continued, addressing the sailor.

"No one can go beyond this spot," answered the stranger, "without giving the password."

"A. F. E.?" said Captain Marston, interrogatively.

"There seems to be something in that," remarked the sailor; "but it will not answer."

"How will this answer?" asked the captain. "'All for Each?'"

"All right," was the reply; "pass, gentlemen."

As the two young men walked forward, they were followed by the sailor, who still held the two pistols in his hands.

On arriving in front of the Spout, they found a beautiful row boat, the bow of which just touched the shore. It was manned by four sturdy seamen, whose hands rested upon their oars, which were ready placed in their rowlocks. A boy, apparently between fifteen and sixteen years of age, in straw hat and light blue trousers and jacket, occupied the stern seat. This last-mentioned person was remarkably handsome; his face was beautifully oval in its shape; its complexion was a pale brunette (if I may use the phrase), there being in it no tinge of red. His form was slender and graceful; his large, soft black eyes had a thoughtful, or rather a dreamy expression, and masses of jet-black curls hung down below his shoulders.

"Jump aboard, gentlemen," said the sailor in fancy dress; "the time is fully arrived, and we shall be expected as soon as we can make the distance. If we don't go at once, somebody will be disappointed."

"A moment, if you please, sir," said John, in a sarcastic tone and manner, and with a darkening expression of face. "May I claim the honour of knowing your name?"

"Certainly, sir," was the answer, accompanied by a mock-ceremonious bow, which did not tend to cool the rising wrath of young Coe. "My name is William Brown, better known as Billy Bowsprit. This latter name may seem, unaccompanied by a proper explanation, to derogate from the dignity of the fair position which I occupy in maritime society, and with which, by-the-bye, I will presently make you acquainted. But it originated in what was, in fact, a compliment to my wit and my other good qualities. A highly intelligent gentleman, of French inclinations—having probably been born of such a disposition, seeing that he was a native of Paris—once did me the honour, on account of some slight jocular remark which fell from me in a social hour, of saying that I was a *beau esprit*. The rude, unlettered sailors," he waved a hand towards those in the row-boat, "have, in their ignorance, manufactured out of this compliment the absurd name of Bowsprit. I submit to the *soubriquet*, partly because those who use it do not know any better, but mainly because it

intimates a just compliment, seeing that, as the bowsprit is in advance of the ship, so do I take the lead of all on shipboard in all affairs where either sagacity or boldness is required."

"Well, Mr. Brown," began young Coe—

"Allow me, if you please, sir," said Bowsprit, interrupting him, and making at the same time a low and apologetic bow; "I have not yet finished the catalogue of myself, a desire to become acquainted with which was intimated in your polite and very flattering inquiry. Permit me to add, to what I have already said, that I fill the honourable post of first-mate on board of as beautiful a little craft as eye was ever blessed with seeing."

The reader will, perhaps, be surprised at the great apparent improvement in the language of Billy Bowsprit since his first introduction in the second chapter. The fact is, that individual had received what is called a good ordinary education, and prided himself upon his ability to talk in either good English, or in what he styled "sailors' lingo."

"Well, Mr. Brown, better known as Billy Bowsprit," said John Coe, in a tone of voice expressive of both anger and resolution, as soon as the voluble sailor gave him an opportunity of speaking, "I wish you to know that I do not allow myself to be dealt with in this summary manner. I shall return home, and any man who interferes with me will do so at his imminent peril."

Saying this, he drew both of his pistols, setting the hammers with his thumbs in the act of drawing them from his pockets.

Billy Bowsprit raised the pistol which was in his right hand, and was about to pull the trigger, when at a slight and rapid sign from Captain Marston, who stood a little in the rear of young Coe, he suddenly pointed the muzzles of both pistols towards the ground. At the same moment the captain drew both of his pistols also, and placed himself by the side of John.

"Come," he said, addressing Billy Bowsprit in a really stern voice, "if this is a jest—as I think it is—we have had enough of it. Tell us what you want, and what the whole of this singular affair means."

"Why, sir," replied the seaman, in a somewhat crest-fallen tone, "no harm has been meant to either of you all the while; and if this young gentleman," looking at John, "hadn't been quite so fiery, everything would have been explained to you some time ago. The fact is, my captain is an old acquaintance of both of you; he hasn't seen either of you for years, and so is very anxious to see you both, if only for a short time. He wants you to come and take breakfast with him this morning. He had business with the schooner up the river here as far as Benedict, to land a cargo of goods. He has to get to Baltimore as soon as possible, but was determined to see you both first. So he landed me early yesterday morning, on this side of the river,

opposite Benedict, to carry a message to you. But not knowing the latitude and longitude of that part of the country, I was obliged to take bearings and to make observations so often, that I did not arrive in your neighbourhood till after midnight; and I did not of course like to waken up families who were strangers to me at such a time of night. The notion about the cards was one of my own—a kind of experiment. I know how much curiosity there is in the world; and I felt certain, therefore, of seeing you two gentlemen here this morning.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Bowlegs—I beg your pardon—Bowsprit,” said the captain. “You seem to be somewhat of a philosopher; you carry out a plan with so much coolness, so much self-possession, being always on your guard neither to act nor to speak hastily or unadvisedly.”

There was evident'y sarcasm, if not irony, in the captain's remarks.

The sailor bowed merely; he seemed to be, to use a common expression, “struck dumb.”

Young Coe laughed heartily. Yet he must doubtless have felt somewhat abashed at the conviction that Marston's course of treating the affair as a farce was decidedly more successful than his own, of viewing it as a melodrama.

There was silence for a minute or two, during which all the pistols which had been drawn were put out of

sight. At length the stillness was broken by a question from John.

"How did you manage to get your card or note into my room?" he asked of the sailor.

"Allow me to keep that secret to myself," answered Billy Bowsprit, with a smile, holding out in his hand at the same time, however, several skeleton keys. "But you are not to suppose, Mr. Coe, that these keys show that I have any bad habits; I have never used them except in such innocent ventures as the present."

John took the skeleton keys in his hand; he had never seen such instruments before.

"I don't think," he remarked, returning the keys, "that any one of those could possibly unlock my outer door."

"One must understand the use of them," replied Billy Bowsprit. "I have others, however."

"How did you so readily make your way to this point?" asked Captain Marston of Billy Bowsprit.

"Why, sir," was the reply, "I have been over this road before, many years ago now. On that occasion, I was for a short time at the houses of both your father and Mr. Coe. I came here because this was the place where this boat here was to meet you two gentlemen and myself."

"Who is this friend of ours who wants to see us, Mr. Bowsprit—I mean Mr. Brown?" asked John.

"I beg your pardon, sir," was the answer. "My cap-

tain particularly ordered me not to tell you ; he wanted, he said, to give you a pleasant surprise."

"What do you say, John ?" asked Captain Marston.
"Shall we accept the invitation of this unknown friend ?"

"If we knew what to do with our horses," said John, "and I could get a note home to tell them what has become of me, I should say 'yes' at once."

"If that is all that is in the way, gentlemen," said Mr. Brown, *alias* Bowsprit, "get your notes ready at once. Here, Tom," he continued, addressing the youth who was sitting on the stern seat of the row-boat, "do you know the way to Millmont and to Blue Oldfields ?"

"If I don't, I can inquire for it, sir," answered the boy.

"Then, as soon as you get the notes which these gentlemen want you to deliver at their houses," said Bowsprit, "take their horses, which you will find just behind those trees, *there*," pointing, "where the road corners with the shore ; and as soon as you can do so, deliver notes and horses to their proper addresses. You will then walk down to Drum Point, where we shall be by that time, and we will there take you aboard."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the boy.

While these directions were being given, Captain Marston had drawn a note-book and a couple of lead-pencils from his pocket. Tearing a blank leaf from the book, he handed that and one of the pencils to John. Using their hats as writing-desks, the two young men

soon finished their notes and handed them to the boy, who immediately started on his mission.

The four men in the boat had been merely lookers-on and listeners in respect to what had been taking place on the shore.

When the boy took his departure, Captain Marston, John Coe, and Billy Bowsprit leaped into the boat.

"Will you steer, Captain Marston, if you please?" asked Bowsprit.

"With pleasure," answered the captain.

"Then, if Mr. Coe will take his seat with you at the stern," said the sailor, "I will take my place at the bow, and act as lookout."

The seats were taken, and the boat having been driven from the shore by one or two backward strokes of the oars, her head was turned down the creek. The supple rowers bending "with a will" to the elastic blades, the light craft fleetly bounded on her course over the glowing tide of St. Leonard's, towards the broad Clearwater, which lay before them in the morning sunshine as ever bright and beautiful.

CHAPTER V.

ON BOARD THE SCHOONER.

SEBASTIAN. How are you, friends?
I'm very glad to see you.—*As You Will.*

TOBY. Who are these men, sir?

WILY WILL. They're travellers only.—*The Masquerade.*

THE row-boats, carrying John, Captain Harry Marston, Billy Bowsprit, and the four seamen, leaving the mouth of St. Leonard's Creek, entered upon that largest and fairest of the several lake-like expanses of the Clear-water—being six miles in length and three in width—which lies between Point Patience on the south-east, and Solitary Point on the north-west.

On gaining an offing sufficient to give the occupants of the boat a view commanding the whole expanse, only one vessel was in sight. This was a graceful little schooner, of about thirty tons burden, which lay at anchor on a part of the river called the Flats, situate on the eastern side of the stream; she was in a position south east of Otter Point, directly in front of Hungerford's Creek, and about a mile and a half from Point Patience. An easy row of three-quarters of an hour over the crystal-like waters, which were but slightly

stirred by a slight wind, brought the boat from the Spout alongside of this schooner.

A vessel so small required no steps to ascend her sides, and the occupants of the row-boat soon leaped upon the deck. They were there met by a young man about five feet and a half in height, with blue eyes, light flaxen hair, and cheeks which, originally fair, were somewhat tanned by exposure to sun, wind, and weather. He was dressed in roundabout and pantaloons of light blue cloth, pumps, and light straw hat.

"How are you, John? how are you, Harry?" he exclaimed, shaking hands with Coe and Marston, with much appearance of cordiality. "I am very glad to see you. I hope that you are not offended with the *ruse* which I used to bring you to see me for a short time? I feared that, if you knew who it was, you would not take the trouble to come to see me."

Both of the young men assured him that a *ruse* was not at all necessary; it was nearly preventing them from coming, and that, had they only known at once that it was their old school-friend, George Dempster, who wanted to see them, there would have been no hesitation on their part in coming to visit him.

John Coe was much surprised at finding George Dempster—who had been his classmate at Princeton, and who was the oldest son of a planter in good circumstances on the eastern shore of Maryland—occupying the position of skipper of a small bay-craft; politeness,

however, prevented him from making any allusion to what seemed to him so singular.

Captain Dempster—to give him the title generally bestowed in courtesy upon the commander of the smallest trading craft, on the Chesapeake Bay, at least—invited his old friends to come at once into his cabin.

Here a mahogany table was handsomely set out, being spread with a fine linen diaper cloth, and being covered with a porcelain breakfast set. Cushioned mahogany seats for four surrounded the table.

The steward—or he who in a vessel so small generally performs the duties of both that officer and of cook—had apparently already received his orders, for scarcely had the captain, his mate, and his two friends entered the cabin, when breakfast was placed on the table. Fragrant coffee, light rolls, fresh butter, ham and eggs, fried crocuses and soft crabs, formed the repast.

“You may think it strange, my friends,” said Captain Dempster, while the party of four were partaking of the meal, for which the bracing morning air and their early ride and row had given my hero and Captain Marston keen appetites, “that you find me in this position. The matter is easily explained, however. It is due to a compromise, agreed to by my father and myself, between my extreme views in favour of a life on the ocean and his extreme views in favour of a life for me on the land. Thus I can indulge, to a limited extent, my preference for a seafaring life, and he can enjoy what he honours

me by calling the pleasure of seeing me frequently. I confess that I would much prefer a life on the open sea ; but one must not be disobedient to an affectionate and generally indulgent father."

While the three friends—Mr. Bowsprit had left the table, as soon as his appetite was satisfied, to attend to duties upon deck—sat over their claret, talking of "old days," as, even when young, we fondly call them, hours sped on. In the meantime the anchor had been secured on board, the sails hoisted, and the vessel had laid her course down the river, impelled by a light wind from the west. Point Patience was soon rounded, and in two hours and a half or three hours from the time of leaving her anchorage, the schooner had passed down the lowest reach of Clearwater, and had rounded to at the extreme end of Drum Point, to take on board the lad who had been sent to deliver the horses and notes of John Alvan Coe and Captain Marston to their respective homes. The boy made excellent speed, and was waiting at the place of rendezvous when the schooner was still some miles from the Point.

"Why, Dempster," said young Coe, seeing that they had passed Drum Point Harbour, "you are not going out upon the bay, are you?"

"I have to take off a load of cord-wood," was the answer, "from the shore near the old Eltonhead Manor House, this side of Cove Point. We shall there be but little farther from your home than here at Drum Point ;

and I want to see all that I can of both of you. But think, Coe, of my carrying a load of fire-wood to Baltimore!

“‘To what base uses we may come, Horatio.’”

“But how are Marston and myself to get home this evening?” asked John.

“Oh! as to that matter,” was the answer, “I can borrow horses from Mr. Chew, whose house is but a few miles from Eltonhead; and the boy Tom, who took your horses home this morning, can go with you, and bring back the animals. But I hope that you will not return until the morning. Let me spend at least one evening with you.”

“What do you say, Marston?” asked John, who was enjoying the society of his friends very much. “I have not seen that lonely old Eltonhead house since I was a schoolboy, and I should like to see it again, especially if we could visit it ‘by the glimpses of the moon’ to-night, since it has now, and has had for some time, I believe, the reputation of being haunted. I hardly think that they would feel uneasy at home on account of my continued absence, as I merely said in my note that I was going to visit a friend on board of his vessel.”

“If you are agreed, let us stay,” replied Marston. “I should like to revisit the old house myself, especially as you say, to

“‘Visit it by the pale moonlight.’”

“And, if you gentlemen desire it,” said. Captain

Dempster, "I will have some hammocks swung this evening in the old manor house. We will pass the night there, and will thus—to take a liberty with Sir Walter Scott's verse—dare

" 'To brave the witches in their den,
The spirits in their hall.' "

This proposition being very agreeable to both Coe and Marston, they consented to continue as Captain Dempster's guests until the morning.

The three young men remained upon deck to enjoy the glorious day and the beautiful and rapidly shifting scenes presented to their view, as the schooner skirted, within a few hundred yards of the beach, the northern shore of Patuxent Roads—a sheet of water which is, in fact (as I have before mentioned, I think), a gulf or widening of the Chesapeake Bay at the mouth of the Clearwater river. While the three friends were gaily chatting, inspired by the cheering influence of their surroundings, Mr. Bowsprit walked up to the commander of the craft.

"Captain Dempster," he said, "I think those sailors in the hold and forecastle will be getting into a state of mutiny soon, if we don't let them come out upon deck. They say that their quarters are too close."

"Tell them," replied the skipper, "they can come up as soon as they please; we are now fairly out of the Clearwater—at least, out of sight of Drum Point Harbour."

The sheet of water called Patuxent Roads is by some considered to be a part of the Clearwater river.

"These men of whom Mr. Brown speaks," continued Captain Dempster, addressing his two friends, "are some newly-discharged United States seamen, whom I am taking to Baltimore. I had a load of freight to carry from Baltimore to Portsmouth. At the latter place these men applied to me for passage to the former city. I told them that I had freight to take from Portsmouth to Benedict, and then a load of wood to carry to Baltimore. As they did not care much for the delay, I bargained to take them to Baltimore, and to charge them only for what their board while on the schooner might be worth, on condition that they would help us to load and to unload. I did not wish so many men to be seen on board of my craft while in the river, since such an incident would probably subject me to the delay of a search by the revenue officer, who, having but very little to do, naturally wishes to make the most of his office."

About thirty rough, sunburnt and weather-beaten men now came upon the deck. Among them was almost every variety of dress which nautical fashions then allowed; but the cloth roundabouts and tarpaulin hats prevailed. They kept away from the after-part of the deck, gathering in groups amidships and towards the bow. They seemed to be in fine spirits, as frequent bursts of somewhat subdued laughter came from the different

groups. Little did young Coe think that he was the subject of their merriment.

It was scarcely half an hour after those men came upon deck when the schooner anchored about fifty yards from the beach, at a point where long ranks of pine and oak cord-wood were ranged along the edge of the cliff, which was here but from twenty to twenty-five feet high. A large flatboat, oblong in shape, and of the kind commonly called "scow," was lying on rollers far up on the beach and close under the cliff.

As soon as the anchor was dropped overboard and the sails lowered and secured, the row-boat—which had been hanging from the davits at the stern of the schooner since the lad had been taken aboard at Drum Point—was forthwith let down into the water. It had to make three trips from the schooner to the shore before the unusually large number of hands were all landed. Then the scow was at once pushed into the water. Some of the seamen soon ascended the cliff by a small ravine near at hand ; and the work of throwing down the wood to the beach, pitching it to the water's edge, and piling it into the scow was at once commenced.

Our hero and his two friends passed the rest of the day, to all appearances, very pleasantly together ; there was so much to say to each other of what young people call, queerly enough, "old times," so much that each had to tell to the others of what had occurred to himself since their last meeting. About an hour after the

schooner came to anchor they took their dinner—which comprised “all the luxuries of the season”—in the elegant little cabin. Mr. Bowsprit was present at this meal, and added to the enjoyment of it by his unique and pleasant sallies. This joyous individual was with them only at dinner; his duty required him to attend to the loading of the vessel. The dinner of the hands, by the way, was sent ashore to them, and eaten under the shade of the trees upon the cliff.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE OLD MANOR HOUSE.

A prisoner, did'st thou say? O, gracious heaven!
Have mercy on my parents and my friends,
And for uncertainty let them not too long suffer!
Oh speedily set me free!—*Anon.*

CYRUS. Who art thou, fair and gentle princess?

MYRANDA. Knight,

I am, alas! unfortunate; but yet
I wish thee well, and fain would do thee service.

—*Romance of Sir Cyrus.*

I will not do it, lady; speak no more.—*The Tempted.*

ABOUT half an hour after the dinner was concluded, the three young friends were taken ashore in the jolly-boat. Leaving the beach, they pursued a path through

a dense forest for about half a mile, when they came into a small opening in the woods, in the centre of which stood the old brick building known as Eltonhead Manor House, surrounded by its out-houses, all of brick. The opening in which this old-time mansion stood had evidently been in former days much more extensive, for among the small pine-trees covering the ground in the part of the forest nearest to the old house, the earth still distinctly bore the impress of corn-rows the marks of former cultivation of that species of grain first obtained from the red man.

Desolation marked the spot. The yard and garden walls were broken down in many places ; the gate at the end of the short avenue had fallen and now lay in ruins. The shade trees in the yard and avenue needed pruning ; scions from their roots had sprang up in all directions. Even at this early season weeds spread over the yard and garden, and closed the gateways ; yet the building itself was in comparatively good preservation.

It was not by any means such a mansion as in Great Britain would be suggested to the mind by the title of manor-house. It was built of bricks imported from England, and the walls were of such thickness that, though time had, in passing over them, stamped his impress upon them in weather-stains and moss and lichen, they stood, apparently, as firm as when first erected. The house was two stories high ; on the floor of the first story, a wide hall passing through the centre of the building,

with two very large rooms on each side of it. The second story, and the attic to some extent, corresponded to the first; a broad staircase led upwards from the hall on the ground floor. Some pieces of old and almost worn-out furniture remained in the building, one or two heavy old tables, and a dozen or so huge and very old-fashioned oaken chairs. In one of the rooms downstairs were two or three rude settees or benches, left by some tenant who had used the premises since they had been deserted by their proper occupants.

During the afternoon Captain Dempster and his guests rambled through the woods and along the bay shore. When they had concluded their ramble and returned to the old manor house, the shades of twilight were gathering. They found that three hammocks, intended for their night's rest, had been swung in one of the large rooms of the second story, and in another room on the same floor, a plentiful and well-lighted board was spread for supper. On a chair beside the supper table was an open hamper of champagne, beside which was a pack of playing cards. The intention of Captain Dempster was declared by himself to be to pass the evening at whist, admitting Mr. Brown, *alias* Billy Bowsprit, to complete the necessary party of four; the game to be enlivened by an occasional glass of wine. No game of whist was played that evening, however. John Coe, after he had finished his supper and taken one or two glasses of champagne, was obliged to plead overwhelming drowsi-

ness, which he attributed to the interesting character and unusual excitement of the day.

Although early in going to bed, yet it was late in the morning when the young man awoke. On looking around him he found that the other hammocks in the room were vacant.

Springing out of bed he hurried to the door; it was locked. The windows were all down. On throwing open the sash of one of them and looking out, he saw a man with a musket on his shoulder, who was promenading to and fro in the yard below, and keeping an eye on the windows of his room. It seemed, then, that he was guarded as if a prisoner. He called out to the man who was apparently keeping watch in the court below.

"What do you want?" asked the guard.

"Where are Captain Dempster and Captain Marton?" exclaimed John.

"I don't know of whom you are talking," answered the guard. "I only know that Captain Vance and Lieutenant Seacome took supper with you last night, after which you got drunk, and had to be put to bed; and that Captain Vance—my captain—said that you were on no account to leave the house. That is all I know about the matter, sir."

"I was not drunk," said young Coe. "I took but two glasses of wine after supper. There must be some mistake somewhere. The gentlemen with whom I supped last night are two of my oldest friends. I never dreamed

that they were capable, nor can I yet believe that they are, of treachery towards me."

"I don't understand what you are talking about," said the man with the musket. "I only know that our orders are not only to keep you within this house, but not to let any one come near enough to the house to hear a human voice from it, even when raised to its highest pitch. We are also ordered, if you make a very loud call, to shoot you at once. We have nearly thirty men here; guards are placed all round the building, and scouts are spread through the country for a mile round. My own impression is, Mr. Coe (that is your name I believe)—but it is, after all, only my opinion, mind you—that you are a very close prisoner. Moreover, I believe that I am authorized in saying to you that you are a prisoner to men from whom no one ever escaped alive. So, close your window, and make the best of your situation."

John left the window, and walked to the door, which he found locked.

On turning his face from the door he noticed, for the first time, in his astonishment at his situation, that a table was already neatly spread, near the middle of the room, with a clean, white damask table cloth, upon which a handsome breakfast-set of china-ware was arranged, with chairs, plates, knives and forks, cups and saucers, for two; but no viands were yet set out upon the board.

The sight of the table so spread, creating in him a fear of being surprised by the entrance of a visitant before his toilet was completed, caused him to hurry on his dress. He found a pair of pistols in his pockets; they seemed to be his own, but on examining them closely, he found not the private mark which he had placed on each of them, soon after they were purchased, to distinguish them from Henry Marston's. It was evident that the re-exchange of pistols, by which his own should have been returned to him, had either been overlooked, or intentionally avoided by his captors the night before.

Scarcely had his hasty toilet been completed, for which he had found in the room water, towels and soap, looking-glass, combs, brushes, shaving instruments, and even scented oils and waters—when the door opened, and two of the seamen came in, bringing the covers for breakfast. They placed upon the table the dishes which they carried, and then immediately retired, taking with them the three hammocks, and removing all vestiges of the room having been slept in.

Shortly after they retired, two or three light taps were given at the door, and a soft and musical female voice was heard asking permission to enter.

"Enter if you can," he said.

The door was opened again, and what seemed to be a vision of loveliness entered. This vision was a lady, rather above than under the ordinary height, with a form as graceful as imagination can conceive. Her face was

oval in shape, her complexion was very pure olive, beautifully tinged with rose. Her features were neither perfectly Grecian nor perfectly Roman, but of a style where the two were equally and beautifully blended. Her eyes were of jet black, and of wonderful brightness, and her hair, of raven hue, was confined by a circlet of large pearls, with a single brilliant just above the forehead, and fell, in heavy and tastefully-arranged masses of curls, all round her head, to below her shoulders. Her dress was of rich black silk, elegantly fitted to her shape, and ornamented, on the flounces of the skirt and above the elbows of the loose sleeves, with thick and glossy fringes of the same hue and material as the dress. Light golden bracelets, ornamented each with pearls and a single diamond, encircled her wrists. As she advanced into the room, her very small and well-shaped feet—covered with a pair of light, black satin slippers, with high heels, and festooned with light gold buckles, flashing with tiny jewels—peeped in and out from under the sweeping folds of her skirt.

This lady advanced gracefully to the head of the table, making an elegant courtesy to the astonished John, and inviting him, by a polite motion of the head, to take a seat.

“A pleasant morning to you, Mr. Coe,” she said.

“I should thank you for your good wish,” answered the young man; “but, lady, I am a prisoner, I am informed. I have, it seems, been betrayed by those whom

I thought my friends. Oh, madam! of all the pains in the world, the greatest is that which is caused by having been betrayed by those in whom we had unlimited faith."

"There are cases in which that which seems to be treason is friendship in disguise. It was no wish to do you injury which caused you to be taken prisoner; but your friends wished to have you always with them. Had harm been intended towards you, I should not have been left here; it was thought that I might devise ways of making captivity more bearable to you. I fear that this opinion only flattered me."

John was young, and therefore impressible; he could but feel the spell of so dazzling a presence. What could he do but make such answer as the lady had sought to obtain?

"So much beauty, madam," he said with *empressement*, "has power to lessen the pain of the most wretched captivity."

"You are improving vastly," said the lady, with a bright and fascinating smile. "We shall, I see, be very good friends, indeed. But the fact that we shall have to pass nearly, if not quite two weeks together, requires that you should have for me some less formal title than 'madam.' Call me, hereafter, Ada."

"You still leave me in doubt, madam. I cannot take the liberty of addressing you familiarly by your Christian name."

The lady seemed for a moment to be in thought.

"Know me then," she at length said, "as Miss Ada Revere."

"Your face is strangely familiar to me," said John.

"You saw me yesterday morning," answered the lady, with a sad smile, "at the Spout on St. Leonard's Creek. You remember the lad who took charge of your and Captain Marston's notes and horses?"

Young Coe's countenance expressed much surprise and interest. But Miss Revere gave him no opportunity to speak.

"But I have known you much longer ago than that," she continued, after making but little pause—"long before either of us knew that there was evil or deceit in the world. I may, perhaps, by-and-by, tell you my sad history"—an expression of intense pain passed over the beautiful face—"but this is no time for such a narrative. Your own position requires consideration and action; and our first thoughts must be given to that."

"Can you explain to me," asked John, "why I was captured, and why I am held as a prisoner?"

"Yes," answered the lady; "and I am authorized to give you the information which you ask. I was not at the store at Drum Point the night before last, when you were seen by Captain Vance to look in at the window while certain goods were being conveyed to their secret depository; but I know all that took place. Ruin to Mr. Ashleigh, and great injury to all connected with the

brig would have been the certain result of your making publicly known what you had discovered. The first thought was to pursue and capture you at once ; and the attempt to do so was made. That attempt was, as you know, a failure. The proposition was then made, as you were known to more than one of the brig's company, to seize you at once at your father's house. This proposition was made by one whom I hate, a man the enormity of whose villany I have no words to express ; I have no doubt that, had his proposal been acceded to, you would have been killed instead of captured. Captain Marston saved you from such a fate ; he thought you might be enticed from your home, and even induced to join the ship's company. He has a great affection for you, as an old schoolmate and friend ; he has told me, with his own lips, that there is no living man for whom he has greater regard than for yourself."

"I do not, without much painful feeling, oppose a lady's views," said our hero, "and yours seem to agree with those of Captain Marston ; but it would not be fair in me to allow you to entertain opinions so incorrect as are Captain Marston's respecting my character. True, I have been made a prisoner in the manner in which he had thought that I could be captured ; so far his views were correct. But he does not understand my character entirely : I can be led—alas ! too easily—even perhaps, to do what my moral sense disapproves of ; but I cannot be driven. Had I been attacked in my

father's house by open force, I do not think that I should have been captured ; I had arms at hand, and should have resisted to the death. My father is himself a strong, sensible, and brave man ; the negroes would have fought for both. We might, at least, have held out until the neighbourhood could have been aroused ; and the result, instead of being disastrous to me, might have been ruinous to the assailants. As to Captain Marston's impression that I might be induced to join a ship's company, or any other company, engaged in illicit trade—especially without my father's consent—such a notion proves that he understands, and but to a small extent, only the outside of my character ; while my inner and real life is to him a thoroughly sealed book.

The lady reflected for some moments. She hardly knew how to act with the case before her. She saw clearly that he felt the power of her beauty ; but that beauty, she began to think, would have no influence to change his opinions. She had been placed in the position in which we find her for the purpose of inducing young Coe to join the company of the brig ; she was authorized to offer him a new office in that company which was to be created especially for him, that of commander of a kind of marine corps, to be organized especially on his account, and the chief officer of which organization, should he become popular with his men, might have the power to defy the

authority of the captain of the brig himself, or even to supersede him.

Miss Ada Revere, as she called herself, determined, after some reflection, to pursue the subject no further for the present.

"We shall be prisoners in this house, Mr. Coe," she added, after a few moments' silence, "for some weeks, while the *Sea-bird* is discharging and receiving freight, and perhaps undergoing some necessary repairs. In the meantime, it will be my duty to use my best efforts to make your captivity bearable. We have the materials here for chess, draughts, and backgammon. I sing a little, and also play upon several musical instruments; but only one instrument of the kind is here—a guitar. Should you wish to take a glass of wine, there are specimens of several vintages at hand. And believe, at any rate, that, whatever may happen, I am entirely your friend."

The lady was evidently in earnest in this last declaration. John made a proper acknowledgment; and in a few moments the two were engaged in a game of chess.

CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD THE BRIG—THE CHALLENGE.

OTHARIO. Remove the prisoner ; the foe is near.—*The Sea Witch.*

He manned himself with dauntless air,
Returned the chief his haughty stare.

* * * * *

Come one, come all !

* * * * *

Fear nought—nay, that I need not say—
But doubt not aught from mine array.
Thou art my guest.—*Lady of the Lake.*

MORE than a week passed, and still John Coe was a prisoner at the old manor house. No chance of escape presented itself ; and neither offers of money nor threats affected his guards. Yet, but for the name of captivity, and the thought of what might be in store for him in the future, his time would have passed pleasantly. Miss Ada Revere—as the lady chose to call herself—exerted all her talents and accomplishments to cause his time to pass agreeably. Games at chess and cards, books of poetry and romance, music of the guitar, and songs sung with charming taste, and accompanied by that fascinating instrument, varied her day and evening entertainments for the prisoner.

As great as was the interest which he felt in her who

made his captivity pleasant, and as much aroused, therefore, as was his curiosity to know what was meant by her declaration that he and she had known each other in earlier days, he could not induce her to tell him to what she referred ; he could only obtain from her the promise that she would at some future time make him acquainted with her history.

Miss Ada Revere had been commissioned by those who held John in captivity, not only to make his imprisonment more bearable, but also to endeavour to persuade him to join Captain Vance's band. In the former task the reader has seen that she was successful ; but the latter seemed to her to be so hopeless, that she did not even attempt it ; she contented herself by persuading him to yield so far to circumstances as to pretend to be inclined to join them, that he might by such means have some chance of securing an opportunity to escape. The violent indignation—to call the feeling by a mild name—which young Coe entertained against his pretended friends, Marston and Dempster, he made no secret of to the lady ; but the earnest desire which he cherished to have each of them before him at the pistol's mouth, or at the sword's point, he kept to himself.

Some ten or twelve days after that upon which young Coe had been so skilfully allured to imprisonment at the old manor house, the brig *Sea-bird* Captain Henry Marston, dropped anchor off the Eltonhead landing. She had needed no repairs, and her unlading and relad-

ing in Baltimore had been executed with the greatest despatch.

Without resistance John allowed himself to be taken from the manor house on board the brig. Where opposition would have been certainly unavailing, the attempt to make it would have been only a compromise of his dignity.

As the moon was in its first quarter, that orb had long since set when the long-boat and jolly-boat belonging to the brig returned from the shore to the vessel, both heavily laden with the men who had been left at the manor house—those in the smaller boat having young Coe among them as prisoner. A single lantern, held by one of the seamen at the gangway, showed but a dim outline of the deck and rigging of the brig, as those newly arrived climbed her sides. John had but a short time to make observations, as he was at once hurried down into the after-cabin, and through that into a small and neat state-room forward of it. He parted with Miss Ada Revere immediately on gaining the deck. There was much expression of pain and uneasiness in the face of the mysterious young girl when she shook hands, on parting with the prisoner at the gangway, and whispered to him “Be firm and hopeful, and do not give way to anger, however just.”

When all had embarked, the boats were secured on deck, the anchor lifted, the sails hoisted, and the brig, impelled by a fair and light but freshening breeze from

the north, sped on her course over the broad, bold waters of the Chesapeake towards the wide Atlantic.

When a bright and cloudless morning, near the middle of June, arose in beauty over the wide and flashing expanse of the lower Chesapeake, Old Point Comfort lay in sight, but far away on the starboard-bow. A number of bay-crafts, and a few sea-going vessels were scattered here and there, at points nearer or more distant, over the bright surface. The smoke of no steamer was seen ; such vessels were at that period very rare, not only on the waters of the Chesapeake, but over the whole world.

At this time, John was confined to his state-room ; he had risen and dressed, but, on trying the door of his room, had found it locked. None of the scamen, either, except those consisting of the watch, were allowed to come upon deck while the brig was in such confined waters ; such a large number of hands being seen would not comport with the *Sea-bird's* character of a peaceful merchant vessel.

The wind continuing to blow fair, although still somewhat light, the afternoon had advanced but two or three hours when the brig had passed out between the capes and was at sea, and entirely out of sight of land. All were now allowed to come upon deck, John among them, to find upon the quarter-deck Captains Marston and Dempster. Near to them stood Mr. Bowsprit, Mr. Afton, and Ada Revere—the latter wearing her sailor-boy dress. The rest of the crew were mostly on the deck amidships ;

some few were in the bows, and a group was gathered but a little forward of the quarter-deck.

"Well, John," said Captain Marston, "I hope that you have made up your mind to join us. I can offer you a respectable position. We have very nearly fifty men, all told. I shall form thirty of these into a company of marines, and offer you the post of commander of this newly-made corps. But, before I proceed any farther, let me introduce you to some of your new shipmates. This old friend of ours, whom you know now, I suppose, as my first mate, Mr. Dempster, becomes my first lieutenant, Mr. Seacome, when we enter the tropics; at the same time your humble servant takes the more convenient name of Captain Vance, and this good brig, the *Sea-bird*, becomes the *Falcon*—the free rover. This is my second mate, Mr. Afton, who prefers to change, under such circumstances, his title only, and to be called Second-lieutenant Afton."

This burly and savage-looking individual growled an oath or two about not being afraid of his own name.

"This joyous individual," continued the captain, motioning his hand towards another of the party, "is my third mate, or lieutenant, and selects his *sobriquet* for his roving name—that is, Third-mate Brown becomes Third-lieutenant Bowsprit. You have already met this jolly person. You are also, I presume, well acquainted by this time, with this young gentleman, Master Revere, my clerk."

At mentioning this last name, Captain Marston, with a slightly sarcastic expression of countenance, waved his hand towards Ada Revere. She cast her eyes to the deck, and a vivid blush spread over her beautiful face. Even in the midst of his own trouble, John could not help feeling pity for the poor girl. Often had the questions recurred to him: "What is her real position on board of this vessel? What is her history?" Sympathy with her lonely condition and the wrongs which he felt that she must have received from one leading member, at least, of the brig's company, strengthened the indignation which he experienced on account of his own injuries, and probably caused him to forget all prudence in answering Captain Marston's addresses to him.

"You, Captain Marston," he said, in a firm and perfectly collected manner, and with a certain intensity of voice which intimated that he felt more than he spoke, "address me in calm tones and familiarly, as if you had done me no wrong to destroy the intimacy and kind feelings which existed between us in past years. In speaking thus, you add insult to injury; your words, manner, and voice suggesting that I am so simple, so very weak in intellect, as not to be able to appreciate the inexpressibly gross outrage which has been committed against me."

"You do me wrong," said Captain Marston, "in supposing for a moment that I doubt that you possess a very unusual degree of intellect. I have always con-

sidered you one of the most remarkably endowed men, both in mind and body, with whom I ever met. In what other manner could I have spoken? and what was the use of my speaking with excitement? That you must remain with us is a fixed fact. You have learned things the public knowledge of which would ruin Mr. Ashleigh, implicate—if an investigation should take place—the character of some gentlemen of the highest standing in Baltimore, or even endanger their safety—to say nothing of the security and interests of those among whom you are now standing. Self-preservation is the first law of nature; and you obliged us to make and hold you a prisoner, by informing yourself wilfully of secrets important to us, and of not the least concern to you. You have yourself alone to blame for the situation in which you are placed.”

“Every citizen,” replied the spirited young man, “has not only a right, but it is his duty, if an opportunity occurs, to investigate whatsoever appears to him to be a breach of the laws of his country.”

“That remark does not affect us at all,” answered Marston, “although it may have justified, to yourself and others, your curiosity and interference. Our duty is to defend ourselves against the laws.”

“With the view which you take of the matter,” retorted John, feeling offended and irritated by Marston’s application to him of the words “curiosity and interference,” and determined to retort at all hazards to

language which appeared to him personally insulting, "I should not have so much cause to complain had I been captured by open force; but my kind feelings towards yourself were played upon in a treacherous and cowardly manner to work out my own injury."

A dark and lowering scowl came upon the face of Captain Marston, and he placed his right hand in his bosom as if to draw a weapon.

At the same instant Afton drew a pistol from one of his pockets and raised it.

"Do you dare," he cried, "to call our captain a coward?"

Captain Marston, however, who seemed not yet to have overcome his rage sufficiently to speak, suddenly grasped Afton's weapon, and drew it from his hand.

"This is courage, truly!" said young Coe, with bitter irony expressed in his voice, and addressing Afton. "You are *very* brave in assaulting an unarmed man. You would feel and act very differently if you and I were alone, and equally armed."

"Captain," exclaimed Afton, "what is the use of bandying words with this fool? Let us settle the matter at once by shooting him, and throwing him overboard. We needn't fear his betraying us then. 'Dead men tell no tales.'"

"Leave him to me," said Captain Marston, moving his hand towards Afton. Then, addressing John, he continued—"You take advantage, John Coe, of our relative

positions ; you know that I, as a brave man, cannot, while surrounded by my band, resent an insult from an unarmed prisoner. If I am a smuggler—and, perhaps, even what you would call a pirate—you know that I cannot so sacrifice my manhood as to take advantage of the means at my command to punish the gross insult which you have offered me.”

“If you boast so much of your manhood, which word also implies your honour, such as it is,” said John, “and feel so wounded at what I have said, the same power which you possess over your band to bring them against me, should also be strong enough to prevent them from interfering while I render you the satisfaction for which you seem to long. Here, in the sight of your men, with no friend to see what is called fair play, I am willing to fight you with sword, pistol, or gun. Yes, I will do so, even though they may kill me, should I defeat you, the moment after ; for I had as lief die as be debarred my liberty, or be obliged to yield my actions to the expediency which is merely suggested by opposing force.”

“I thank you for your proposition,” said Captain Vance, “and accept of it. You shall have a fairer contest, too, than you seem to expect. Here, Dempster, Afton, Brown.”

The officers addressed drew around their captain.

“Promise me,” said Marston, “by all the pledges that bind our association together, that if Mr. Coe should succeed in killing me, he shall receive no injury for doing

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so ; and further, that, upon his mere pledge of honour to keep secret what he has learned about us, you will land him at any port, near to our course, at which he may wish to disembark. Promise, moreover, under the same pledges, that you will not interfere in the combat about to take place between Mr. Coe and myself, by deed, word, or look."

The officers addressed, even the brutal Afton, gave the pledges required unhesitatingly, being perfectly assured that their captain would gain the victory.

"What weapons do you choose, Mr. Coe?" asked Marston.

"It is for you to choose," said John ; "you have the right as the challenged party."

"I select swords, then," said Captain Marston ; "the conqueror with that weapon is not obliged to injure his adversary."

"You seem to consider it as granted, by that remark," observed our hero, "that you will be successful?"

"By no means," answered Marston.

John turned upon his adversary an inquiring and rather threatening look ; but he said nothing more on the subject.

Lieutenant Dempster, or Seacome, was sent into the captain's cabin for a pair of small-swords.

Ada Revere had looked imploringly upon Marston and Coe alternately, while the quarrel had been growing to its present condition. Anxiety and terror were both

plainly expressed in her face ; she had seemed, hitherto, desirous of interfering, but fearful of doing so ; no doubt she had learned from much experience the danger of attempting to check Captain Marston in any of his acts. Now the prospect of an immediate conflict seemed to rouse her to action. She threw herself upon her knees between the two foes.

“ Oh ! I beseech you,” she cried, “ let this quarrel go no farther. You know, Captain Marston, why I feel an interest in you ; but you do not know that this gentleman, Mr. Coe, rendered me, many years ago, one of those services which can never be forgotten. Think, gentlemen, what horror it would be to me to see one of you injured, or perhaps even killed by the other, and have pity upon me.”

John Coe raised her from her kneeling position with evident tenderness.

“ I do not fully know what you mean, madam,” he said, “ and cannot, therefore, make use of your meaning to put a stop to what is going on. But I can feel for your evident suffering without knowing its cause.”

“ Master Revere,” said Marston, with sadness and yet something of sternness in his voice, “ if I could, I would consult your feelings in this matter. But what you say comes too late, even if it were fully explained. Mr. Brown, do me the favour to lead this young gentleman to his state-room door.”

Mr. Bowsprit advanced, and taking the hand of Ada

led her away. She retired, still extending her disengaged hand towards the intended combatants, with an imploring glance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHIP DUCHESS.

She was a vision of delight.—*Ballad.*

These treasures are for you, my own beloved one—

Laid up for you by your own father's hand.—*Foxglove.*

ANTONIO. A long, low, black and rakish vessel, say you?

PIETRO. Yes, captain; she's a pirate beyond doubt.

ANTONIO. We'll have a fight or e'er she capture us.—*The Storm.*

THE truth of my history obliges me to relate some occurrences powerfully bearing upon John's fortunes.

It was in the early part of the month of June, in the year 1817, when the ship *Duchess* left the port of Kingston, in the island of Jamaica, bound to the port of Havre, in France. She had been chartered for this voyage by a French merchant by the name of Jules Durocher.

Jules Durocher had settled, when a young man, as a planter in the island of Hayti; but dissatisfied with a planter's life, he had sold his land in that island, and afterwards removed from Hayti to Kingston, where he established himself as a merchant. Here he had succeeded in making a large fortune, when he was but little

more than forty years of age. Having lost his wife, an English lady, whom he had married in Jamaica, and to whom he was much attached, and his health, which had for many years seemed to be good, failing at length suddenly from the insidious and slowly-working effects of the climate, he had determined to retire from business, to realize his gains, and to pass the remainder of his days in his native France, with his only child Louise.

He had now so far carried out his intentions as to have converted into gold and bills of exchange all his large fortune, except the comparatively small portion which had been required to purchase a cargo of the native products of Jamaica for the ship he had chartered. So uncertain, however, are the calculations of men, that now, when the quietude in which he had long hoped to pass his declining years appeared almost certain of realization, his health began rapidly to decline; and his state was so weak, when the lading of the *Duchess* was completed, that he had to be taken from his bed on land and carried to one on board of the ship. Such was the state of things in which Jules Durocher and his daughter Louise left their home of many years in Kingston, to transfer their fortunes to the father's native France.

Louise Durocher was very beautiful; but her beauty was not of the kind which we generally attribute to French ladies, and which is characterized by sparkling black eyes, raven-hued tresses, and a brunette complexion.

Her loveliness was a direct antithesis to this description. Her hair deserved fully the title of "golden," on account of both its colour and its lustre, and held smoothly round her head by a plain riband, fell in a mass of rich curls over her shoulders. Her softly bright eyes, dark, but decidedly and purely blue, exhibited in every glance a tender heart and an intelligent mind. A soft rose-tinge upon her cheeks illustrated by a delicate contrast the pearly fairness of her complexion.

At the time when she is introduced to my readers, she was dressed in a loose white muslin morning robe, slightly confined at the waist by a white silken cord ; and from beneath the folds of this garment peeped out now and then two beautifully-shaped little feet clad in a delicate pair of white satin slippers. The band round her hair was also white. A dress of this description does not generally comport with beauty of the style of Louise's ; but in the case of loveliness so exceeding as hers, it absolutely added to the effect. The pure, innocent, and elevated expression of her face, haloed by her lustrous wealth of golden hair, the beholder might be said to realize the ideal of the old masters.

The cabin of the *Duchess* occupied, as usual, the after-part of the ship. Directly at the stern, and dividing the width of the vessel between them, were two handsome and elegantly-furnished state-rooms—the one assigned to Mr. Durocher, and the other to his daughter. Each of these state-rooms opened into the

saloon, which, occupying the breadth of the ship, was very nearly square. Forward of this saloon, a narrow passage leading from it divided a double row of state-rooms—two upon each side—which were used by the officers of the ship.

At the time when these new characters are introduced to the reader, the *Duchess* had been some days out of port. She had gone through what is called the Windward Passage—between the islands of Cuba and Hayti—had passed through the channel crowded with many islets, which lies between Caycos and Turks islands and had fairly entered upon the broad Atlantic. The invigorating air of the open sea had so improved the health of Mr. Durocher that he had been brought from the bed in his state-room to a sofa in the saloon. Here he was attended by his daughter and a young quadroon slave girl, who waited upon the young lady.

Louise, who was skilled in music, and performed upon several instruments, had just finished singing, to an accompaniment on the harp, the beautiful old song entitled “My Normandy”—a genuine relic of the age of chivalry, of the days of the *trouviers* and *troubadours*—when her father’s emotion caused her to put aside the instrument. That touching song, applying fully to the case of the returning exile himself, with its tender refrain—

“I long again the land to see,
Which gave me birth—my Normandy,”

recalled the past vividly, with many a hope then entertained of a happy return to his native land—many a hope which the untimely death of his wife had destroyed for ever.

“Dear Louise,” said Mr. Durocher, “how feelingly you sing that charming song of my native land! What happiness I used to anticipate in pointing out to your now sainted mother—when wealth, achieved through a long and tedious exile, should enable me to resume, in my Normandy, the station from which losses had reduced my family—all the beautiful scenes so familiar to my childhood. God destroys such hopes to draw our affections away from the things of earth. ’Tis now for you only, my beloved child, that I at all consider a worldly future. You will have wealth; few of the daughters of France born upon the soil will be heirs to such a fortune. But there are cares also belonging to the possession of riches; and how will an inexperienced young girl like you know how to meet these?”

“Do not trouble yourself about me, my dear father,” said the affectionate daughter. “Is not your health improving? Every day since we left Kingston you have gained strength. You will live yourself to see your money safely invested and your daughter’s future secured. Let us hope that many, many happy years on earth await us.”

“If future years are in store for me, Louise,” replied Mr. Durocher, “they may be cheerful when blessed by

your presence, but I cannot be happy where your mother is not. I feel convinced, however, that I shall soon meet her again ; I am impressed with a feeling—though I know not why—that I shall never more see France.”

The young lady left her seat beside the harp and sat upon a chair near to the sofa on which her father was reclining. She placed her arm round his neck, and took in her disengaged hand one of his.

“Dearest father,” she said, in a tender and soothing tone of voice, “these low spirits are but the lingering effects of your illness. Life must still have much happiness in store for you. The grand and beautiful scenes of day and night, upon land and water, exhibiting, as they ever do, a proof of the power and goodness and love of God towards His creatures, must have an influence leading to happiness upon every human soul. I am sure that one so good as you must feel this blessed influence.”

“I do feel it, my dear child,” said the invalid ; “but that feeling cannot remove the uneasiness which I experience at the conviction that I must soon leave you alone in the world. I have a number of relations in France ; but you are unknown to all of them ; even I, so long has it been since I have met any of them, must be nearly, if not quite forgotten.”

The speaker paused awhile in reflection. Louise was also silent ; she could make no reply to her father’s last

observation ; its probable truth admitted of no just objection. Mr. Durocher at length spoke again—

“ Louise,” he said, taking a pocket-book from an inside breast-pocket of his coat, “ in this pocket-book are bills of exchange on different bankers in France to the amount of twelve hundred thousand francs. Even if these be lost, the money will still be safe ; the bills are executed in triplicate ; one copy of each has been left by me in the hands of a friend at Kingston, and the third copy of each has been sent to a gentleman in Havre. These bills can only be paid on my endorsement, or on that of my legal representative, in case of my death. There is a note of the names of these gentlemen and of a list of the drafts in my trunk ; here is a copy of the same note which I wish you to take possession of. In the strong-box in my state-room are fifty thousand francs in gold ; and the cargo of this ship should sell at Havre for at least a hundred and fifty thousand francs. In the event of my death, this property is yours. I should have mentioned to you these particulars before ; I feel urged now to postpone no longer giving you this information.”

At this instant, and before Louise could make a reply, a loud voice giving orders and the noise of hurrying feet were heard upon deck.

“ Celeste,” said Mr. Durocher, addressing the quadroon girl, “ go upon deck and see if you can learn what is the matter.”

The girl hurried up the cabin steps, as ordered, and soon returned accompanied by the captain.

"What is the cause of the disturbance overhead, Captain Johnson?" asked the invalid.

"We have been apparently pursued for some hours," was the answer, "by a rather suspicious-looking vessel. Pirates are by no means uncommon in these waters, and it is not improbable that this is one. As the wind is light, we have crowded on every yard of canvas. The stranger, nevertheless, is evidently gaining upon us. I have, therefore, ordered our two twelve-pounders to be made ready for service, and have directed the men also to look to their small-arms. If it were late in the day we might indulge a hope of keeping at a sufficient distance from the suspicious craft to make our escape in the night."

The time was between nine and ten o'clock in the morning.

The face of Louise became white with alarm. The poor girl seemed to be terribly frightened.

"There is no need of feeling alarmed, Miss Durocher," said the captain, in a cheerful voice. "We are not by any means certain the stranger is a pirate. Should he prove to be such, the probabilities are in our favour that he will not molest us, when he finds, on nearer approach, that we are so strong; these sea-robbers are not apt to assault any vessel which they cannot capture without fighting. We are well manned, having sixteen officers

and seamen, all able men. We have two cannons and plenty of muskets and cutlasses, besides a full supply of ammunition. Even if he should attack us, I think that we can easily beat him off. My vessel is larger than his, and manœuvres well; and fully one-half of us are man-of-war's men."

"Why do you suppose," asked Mr. Durocher, "that the stranger is in pursuit of you?"

"Because," replied Captain Johnson, "when we first saw him, the course which he was steering was due south-east as ours is north-east, and he is now directly astern of us. If Miss Durocher will come with me upon deck, she can see our pursuer very plainly by aid of the telescope. You are too weak, I suppose, to get upon deck yourself, Mr. Durocher?"

"I will try to do so, if you will give me your aid," answered the invalid.

"You had better not undertake so much," said Louise. "I am afraid that the fatigue will do you harm."

"It will not hurt him at all, miss," said Captain Johnson, cheerily. "He need not suffer from fatigue at all. If you will let that yellow girl of yours bring up an easy-chair, I will carry your father up in my arms."

Captain Johnson was, indeed, a powerfully-made man; he was fully six feet in height, and stout in proportion. Constant exercise in the open air had given

to him the full vigour to which his herculean frame seemed to entitle him.

As soon as the invalid was made comfortable in his easy-chair, and was in a position from which he commanded a view of the ocean all around, the spy-glass was handed to him. Far away towards the south-west, and at first sight rather low upon the horizon, the strange sail could be seen by the unassisted eye ; but the telescope showed that her hull was above the horizon.

"There seem to be a number of men upon her deck," said Mr. Durocher ; "and she has one of those long pivot-guns amidships. That is a very dangerous cannon, Captain Johnson ; our pursuer may, with a gun of so long a range, do us ruinous injury without coming near enough to allow us to do him harm with our small cannon."

The telescope was passed to the captain, and by him to Louise. It was then handed to the officers of the ship.

"Can you make out her hull ?" asked the captain of one of these officers, who had at the moment the glass in his hand.

"Partly," was the answer. "What I can see of it is entirely black. She seems to be clipper-built."

"And these Baltimore clippers are so fleet," remarked the captain.

Things began to look dark for those on board the ship,

it must be confessed; if the stranger's intentions were hostile, his superior speed, and the long range of his pivot-gun, made the escape of the chase very doubtful. Captain Johnson, however, like a good officer, made every preparation for defence. His self-possessed and even cheerful manner inspired those under his command with confidence. But Louise became very pale, and Mr. Durocher suffered much in mind, principally upon her account; but, for the sake of each other, their fears were kept to themselves. The quadroon girl shivered with terror, on her own account, and on account of those to whom she had been so much attached for many years.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMBAT.

The foe, invulnerable still,
Foiled his wild rage by steady skill,
Till, at advantage ta'en, his brand
Forced Roderick's weapon from his hand.—*Lady of the Lake.*

ORANO. We offer you the post of captain, sir.

ORTEGA. I accept—with conditions.—*The Onslaught.*

A pirate ship, and a pirate crew.—*Old Song.*

THE swords were brought. A clear space was left upon the deck for the combatants to move in, around which the sailors—first those who had stood near to

the quarter-deck, and afterwards those from the more forward parts of the vessel—formed a ring ; all were eager and intensely interested, but quiet spectators. Seeing the officers offering no interference, they no doubt considered that it was also their part to make no interruption. Mr. Dempster acted as second to Marston ; Mr. Brown, better known as Bowsprit, acted as second to John Coe.

The swords were measured by the seconds and found of equal length. As both the weapons belonged to Captain Marston, the choice of them was offered to the prisoner, who took one of them at once, apparently without making any selection. The combatants were then placed in position ; the salutes with the blades were given, and the fight began.

It was very soon apparent that young Coe was the more expert swordsman. Captain Marston had, when young, as most young gentlemen of fortune were in the habit of doing, taken lessons in the small-sword exercise ; but he had of late been accustomed only occasionally to combats with the cutlass ; and such conflicts—as even one who is not an expert at either weapon must know—must rather tend to diminish than increase one's skill with the small-sword. His antagonist, on the contrary, had been in the habit for years of practising play with foils with young gentlemen in his neighbourhood, so that he had much improved his skill of late years.

The sword-points were scarcely crossed before John was aware that his adversary's life was in his hands. This discovery was a great relief to his mind. He placed no faith in the pledges given by Captain Marston's officers; on the contrary, he felt assured that, if he should kill one who had virtually acknowledged himself to be a pirate-chief, his own life would be forfeited; even if the officers should keep their pledges to the letter, the common sailors were bound by no pledge. These reflections caused him to use all his efforts to disarm his adversary; and added to these considerations, inducing him to pursue such a course, was the memory of early associations, and also the apparent generosity of his foe in granting him a combat at all, as equal almost as it could be made under the circumstances.

Captain Marston, too, became very soon aware that he was fighting against one who was superior in the use of the weapon which he had selected. Shaken from his usual self-possession by a knowledge of this fact, and irritated by the forbearance of one whom he had considered his inferior with any weapon, and especially with the one which he had chosen, he made the mistake usual in such cases,

"And showered his blows like wintry rain."

John Coe, on the contrary, kept perfect control of his faculties. For an instant he retreated rapidly before the violent assault of his adversary; but the next moment,

with a short, sudden and powerful blow of his sword, he sent Captain Marston's weapon flying over his own head. His own sword-point was immediately at the captain's breast.

There was a sensation among the spectators at this sudden and totally unexpected result of the combat ; but there was no movement towards any interference.

Captain Marston's arms dropped by his side. He stood before his antagonist, as if ready to receive his sword-thrust. Coe stood, meanwhile, with his sword fixed, as it were, in the same position, while he kept his eyes firmly bent upon those of his conquered adversary.

"I am at your mercy, Mr. Coe," said Captain Marston, at length in a voice that palpitated, if I may use the term, partly on account of his recent violent exertion, and partly because of surprise at his defeat.

"I wish you no harm," answered the victor, lowering his sword-point. "I only wished to show that had I been assailed by open force, I should not have been easily made a prisoner."

The expression of the faces of the lookers-on showed that their captive had risen very highly in their estimation within the last few minutes. The most brutal and debased human being in the world still admires manly courage and magnanimity. The determined bearing of the prisoner, indicating a perfect preservation of his self-respect and self-reliance, in such adverse circumstances, and his willingness, even eagerness to prove his manhood

by fighting Captain Marston in the very presence of his band, and the coolness, skill, and self-control which he had exhibited in winning and in using his victory, all manifested those qualities which men most admire in men. Captain Marston saw the admiration of his prisoner which was expressed in the faces of his officers and men; and he immediately resorted to an expedient which, by exhibiting on his part a generosity apparently equal, but in fact more than equal, to that of his adversary, might neutralize to some extent the injury which may have been done to his standing in the opinions of his band by the result of the contest.

"You see, gentlemen," he said, addressing his ship's company, "that in the opinion which I have heretofore expressed to you of my friendly foe, I have not over-rated his merits. Let us have three hearty cheers for John Alvan Coe."

The three cheers called for were immediately given with a will.

"I further propose, gentlemen," said Captain Marston, "that we proceed forthwith to form the corps of marines which I have before spoken of to you, and that Mr. Coe be offered the captaincy of that band."

"And with all due deference to Captain Vance," exclaimed Afton, before Captain Marston's proposition could be acted upon, and with his usual intermingling of expletives, "I propose that we either make Mr. Coe commander of this brig, or throw him overboard. For

my part, I should prefer to have the latter alternative carried out. No divided command can exist except to our disadvantage. If Mr. Coe is, in your opinion, superior to Captain Vance, make him our chief; but do not give to him a charge which, unless he and the captain entirely agree, may cause civil war on board the brig."

"I beg to differ with my honoured friend, Lieutenant Afton," said Bowsprit, facing the ship's company. "As Mr. Coe has proved himself a brave and skilful man, we should try to secure him as a *co*-partner in our enterprises. As he is a born and bred gentleman, there are *co*-gent reasons why he should hold a respectable position among us. But, although he has shown that he is superior to Captain Vance in the use of the small-sword, we are not therefore to suppose that he is *co*-equal with our distinguished chieftain in experience in seamanship and in habits of command. Nor would our new friend rank, in the position proposed, with our captain; he would be *co*-ordinate in rank with Lieutenant Seacome. There would be no danger of a conflict of authority with Captain Vance; there is a commander of marines on board of every man-of-war. I cannot, therefore, agree with either of the propositions of my distinguished friend Afton. His first would be unjust to our captain, his second would be an equal wrong to the gallant new comer. I second Captain Vance's motion."

The speech of Billy Bowsprit was received with much

applause, and the proposition of the captain was adopted by a vote of two to one. Mr. Afton had his admirers among those old salts who were, like himself, rough in language, and especially hardened in crime. These men were not influenced in their votes by the authority of the captain, or the eloquence of Billy Bowsprit.

"And now, Mr. Coe," said the captain, "will you do me the honour of accepting the post to which we have elected you, and give me the pleasure of being the first to name you by your new title, Captain Coe, of the marine force?"

Young Coe remembered the conversation upon this very subject which he had held, in anticipation, with Ada Revere, and her advice as to the course which he should pursue, should the offer be made to him. He called to mind also that, immediately preceding his duel with Captain Marston, she had declared that she was indebted to himself for an important service. He knew that that unfortunate girl must be better qualified by experience than he was himself to guide his course in relation to this matter. He determined, therefore, that he would consult with her again, and, should he find her sincere in her friendly feelings towards him, to be governed by her counsel in the desperate strait in which he was placed. With this purpose in view he made answer to Captain Marston's question—

"Your offer, Captain Vance, and gentlemen," he said, addressing the officers and seamen, and, for the first

time, giving the captain of the brig his assumed name, "so changes the relation which I bore towards you but a few moments ago, that I must beg of you to grant me a little time to consider this question so suddenly placed before me. With your permission, I will retire for a few moments, and then return and give you my decision. In any case, I thank you for the favour you have shown to me."

Having thus spoken on deck, he retired to the cabin. In the saloon he found Ada Revere. She sat upon a sofa, with her head resting upon her hands. On the entrance of our hero she rose at once to meet him, and her face, which had been sad, expressed a sense of relief.

"Oh! I am so glad to see you, Mr. Coe," she said. "Your face seems to show that nothing unpleasant has resulted from the state of things in which I left you. Tell me—do tell me quickly—what has happened?"

John related to her all that had occurred.

"And now, Miss Revere," he added, "I have come to ask an explanation of your language when you spoke some time ago of being under an obligation to me. When I saw you at the old manor house, your face seemed familiar to me. I thought that that recognition was accounted for by my having seen you in your boy's dress, at the Spout on St. Leonard's Creek. But you appeared to refer to an acquaintance between us dating farther into the past."

"I can see nothing wrong, Mr. Coe," answered the beautiful girl, "in telling you—in outline, at least—all my history. Do you remember Ada Ashleigh, who was one of your schoolmates at the old Manor Quarter school-house situate between Millmont and Drum Point?"

"Certainly I do," was the answer. "What a sweet and guileless little girl she was!"

"I was that little girl, Mr. Coe," said Ada. "Do you not remember that, when any of the school-children charged me with being the daughter of a man who received smuggled goods, after my father was brought before a court in Baltimore on such a charge, you always took my part? And once—an occasion which I shall never forget—when Mr. Dempster, now an officer on board of this brig, but then a boy almost a year older than yourself, wounded my feelings even to weeping by his jeers, you rebuked him so severely for being rude, as you said, to a harmless little girl, that he challenged you to fight. I shall never forget the gratitude which I felt towards you for championing my cause, and my delight when you handled Dempster so roughly, that he was obliged to acknowledge himself beaten, and to promise never to say a harsh word to me again."

"We had heard in Calvert," said John Alvan, "that Ada Ashleigh had made a runaway marriage in Baltimore, for which she was disinherited by her father."

Since that intelligence was received, two or three years ago, I have heard nothing of her fate."

"That runaway marriage was between me and Harry Marston," said Ada. "He intended it for a false marriage; and when he told me that it was such, I believed his words. But I learned, nearly a year ago now, from the friend of Captain Marston, whom he engaged to procure the services of some one, not a minister of the gospel, to perform the ceremony, that we had actually been wedded by a regular priest, and I have since obtained from that priest a certificate of the marriage. The conscience of Henry Marston's friend would not, at the last, allow him to take part in such deceit. My father never knew that it was with Captain Marston that I left his house; nor have I yet been able to summon the necessary courage to inform Captain Marston that we are really married. I wish that he knew it. I am sure that, had he been acquainted with the fact, he would never have commissioned me, his own wife, to act the part which he meant that I should act during your imprisonment at the old manor house and at the hut."

"I would tell him for you myself, unhesitatingly," remarked John Alvan, "but the information would come most properly from you."

After some further conversation upon the subject, young Coe asked—

"Do you still advise me, madam, to accept this

position which is offered to me? I do not mean absolutely to accept it, but seem to accept it. I know now that you are really my friend, and have full faith in you."

"I certainly do," answered the lady. "Your refusal to do so must eventuate in your death. They have gone too far to set you free, even under the most solemn pledges. As the most of these men would not be faithful to any pledge made to you, so they would not trust in any pledges made by you to them, under the circumstances. Whereas, by seeming to accept the offer, you will, in the ordinary course of things, have many chances of making your escape."

"Yet," remarked the young man, "if they were to undertake, for instance, to capture a merchant vessel, I would die rather than give assistance in the commission of such a crime."

"Of course," answered Ada, "but the 'chapter of accidents' may make unnecessary your placing yourself in antagonism to the brig's crew on that question. We will hope so."

"Have they ever really made such captures?" asked young Coe.

"Many such," replied Ada. "They are pirates in the full meaning of the word."

"In this business they must have committed murders," said John.

"There is not a man in the brig, except yourself,"

answered Ada, "who is not responsible for the shedding of human blood."

"Dear madam," said John, pityingly, "what a terrible life you must have led among such men."

"I have often been able to save bloodshed," said Ada. "Most of the captures made by the *Falcon* have been made without the taking of human life. When life has been taken it has been mostly in cases where a fight has followed a refusal on the part of a merchant vessel to surrender. I have never known a case where Captain Marston has allowed any one to be hurt after surrender. Indeed, I think at heart he is sick of the business in which he is engaged. Afton, however, and too many of the crew with him, appear to take pleasure in acts of cruelty."

The conversation between Mrs. Marston and young Coe here closed, and the latter returned upon deck. He expressed to the captain and the ship's company his acceptance provisionally of the post offered to him, it being understood that he reserved to himself the right to resign it whenever he thought proper to do so.

Mr. Afton loudly pronounced his maledictions against such "half-way" courses; and there were at first some dark scowls seen among the men.

"I welcome you into our gallant service, Captain Coe," said Captain Marston, with much cordiality in his manner, "and am sure that no one member could be a greater addition to our company. As to the terms

which Captain Coe makes," continued the pirate chief, addressing the men, "no one can object to them; any man has the right to resign at any time any office which he holds among us. The main thing is that Captain Coe is now a member of our band, and we all know how forcibly, in an instance of this kind, applies the old adage, 'In for a penny, in for a pound!' Shipmates welcome our new comrade."

These remarks of Captain Marston, intended to counteract what had been said by Afton, and to satisfy the crew with regard to the reservation made by Coe, were well-timed, and their new comrade was welcomed with loud cheers.

The company of marines was at once formed, and "Captain" Coe, as they called him, immediately commenced the performance of his new office, by taking his men through such a preparatory drill as the short remaining time of daylight would allow. It was his determination to make himself as popular as he could among those who were placed under his command, with the view of using his influence for such good purposes as might hereafter present themselves. He was eminently successful in his endeavours to obtain popularity, his men already entertaining great admiration of his courage and resolute demeanour.

The *Sea-bird* continued for some days to run a southerly course, impelled by a moderate breeze from the west. Her prow was then turned towards the south-east, it

being the intention of Captain Marston to get into the track of vessels trading between the West Indies and the Spanish Main, and the different European ports. While on this course certain changes were made in the appearance of the brig. The white stripe along her bends, just below the guards, was covered with a strip of black canvas; like strips, on which were painted the words the *Falcon*, were placed on each of her bows, and on her stern, over the name the *Sea-bird*, and the carved image of one bird was substituted for that of another as her figure-head. Other alterations were made in her rigging and elsewhere, so that the vessel's appearance was almost entirely changed.

CHAPTER X.

THE CHASE.

The western breeze is fresh and free ;
Before its power the vessels fleet,
And, bounding o'er the flashing waves,
Like lovers haste to meet.—*Ysobel—A Ballad.*
And sweep through the deep,
While the stormy tempests blow ;
While the battle rages loud and long,
And the stormy tempests blow.—*Mariners of England.*
By each gun a lighted brand,
In a bold, determined hand.—*Battle of the Baltic.*

DAY after day the wind continued to blow mildly from

the west, and the brig still made regular but slow progress before it, on her south-eastwardly course.

One morning, before sunrise, a strange sail was espied upon the larboard bow. It was during Mr. Afton's watch that this discovery was made. The second-lieutenant pronounced the stranger to be a merchant ship. This fact, with the opinion of the officer of the watch, being communicated to the commander of the brig, who was still in his hammock, and whom we must now call Captain Vance, orders were given by him to crowd all sail on the *Falcon*, and to pursue the stranger ship.

Hour after hour passed away, and still the pirate vessel continued to gain on the chase, which had in the meanwhile been discovered to be a large and heavily-laden ship.

Mile after mile the brig gained while the wind lasted ; but towards two o'clock the light breeze, which had been blowing from the same point so many days, began to die away, and by noon there was an absolute calm. The brig was at this time still many miles distant from the ship. For more than an hour each vessel remained, except as affected by that unceasing swell (in this instance scarcely perceptible) which never allows the water to be perfectly tranquil, as motionless as—

“ A painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.”

Between one and two o'clock, clouds, in masses at

first comparatively light, but which grew dense and denser, began to move overhead from the east towards the west; these were evidently impelled by a wind travelling in the same direction, and light flaws of which occasionally made faint shadows over the ocean by slightly stirring its waters, and sometimes gave a soft pulsation to the sails of the two vessels.

Shortly after two o'clock, lightning flashes gleamed in rather quick succession, from below the eastern horizon; but no thunder was heard. At length a small portion of densely black cloud showed itself in the same direction, above the line dividing the ocean and sky. This cloud rapidly rose, spreading itself as it ascended, while flashes of lightning, followed, after fast-diminishing intervals, by grand and grander thunder-burst, flamed forth more and more frequently, from the dark and threatening mass of vapour.

Soon blasts of wind, heavily laden with moisture, and each more powerful than that which preceded it, came with rapidly decreasing lulls, from the west, until the breeze, having at length become continuous, had grown almost to a storm. Both vessels had prepared for this increased force of the wind by shortening sail. The chase, however, urged by the necessity of escaping as well from the brig which pursued her as from the storm, still carried all the canvas which she could bear under the heavy pressure of the wind, almost directly before which both vessels were now steering an east-north-east

course. Still the brig, built after the Baltimore clipper model, so famed for fleetness, continued to gain rapidly upon the ship.

"Suppose, captain," said Afton, addressing Marston, "we range the 'Long Tom' to bear upon her, and give her a shot?"

"There is no chance of hitting her," answered the captain, "with the brig beginning to pitch in the way she is now; it will be but waste of powder. Besides, the distance is too great."

"If we wait," objected the second-lieutenant (so-called), "until we get within range of her two cannon, she will have the advantage of us in the number of her guns. If we fire at her from a distance, on the contrary, her cannon will be of no use to her."

The intelligent reader, of course, already understands that the ship pursued was the *Duchess*, which, with her passengers and captain, was introduced to his attention in a previous chapter.

"In the present condition of the weather," replied the captain to the objections of his second officer, "we shall have to lose the advantage of the longer range of our gun, or lose our hoped-for prize. At the rate at which we are now gaining on her, it will be nearly sunset when we overtake her. The sky is already darkened by clouds, and if the rain—which is threatening to fall every moment—should continue into the night, we may lose sight of her altogether, and she may make her

escape in the darkness. If she offers to resist, therefore, we shall have to fight at close quarters."

"I hope that she may be worth the trouble she is likely to give us," muttered Afton, with his usual maledictions.

"And I hope, Afton," retorted the captain, with a jesting smile, "that you have no intention of getting nervous about the matter?"

"A pretty time of day," rejoined Afton, "for anybody to be doubting my courage. You know well enough that I was only wishing that we should make a good haul in capturing her."

"We cannot tell what she is worth," said the captain, "until we get on board of her. This we know—that she is a large ship, and appears to be well laden. Others might give up the hope of capturing her on account of the state of the weather; I never give up what I undertake."

"It is very evident," said Lieutenant Seacome, "from the manner in which she is handled, that the man who has charge of her is a thorough seaman."

"Yes," assented the captain. "And there is something about the man's movements, as I note him through the telescope, which convinces me that he will make a fight of it before he yields. Captain Coe, you must see to it that your men are ready with all their side-arms. They evidently have men enough to manage both their cannon; and they will, therefore, have the advantage

of us, unless we board them, or lay so closely alongside of them that our small-arms will tell. I am determined to board, however, if it be possible to do so in such a sea."

"My men are prepared to act at a minute's notice," said the captain of Marines.

Young Coe had made much progress in the last few days in perfecting his men in their drill. He had already gained their confidence in his capacity for command, his courage and skill, and his possession of all his faculties in moments of danger. Notwithstanding the language in which he had so promptly answered Captain Vance's (as we must call him now) inquiry, he entertained not the slightest intention of taking any part in the commission of crime; he was determined, on the contrary, to use his influence with his men to prevent it. For the manner in which he should carry out this latter determination he was compelled to trust to contingencies.

On board the pirate brig every preparation was made for a conflict. In the meantime the hours advanced, and at length the two vessels' were within short cannon range of each other. It still wanted more than an hour to sunset, and notwithstanding the dense clouds which still covered the sky (the rain which had fallen heavily for awhile had soon ceased) the daylight was still clear enough to distinguish objects on board of one ship from the other, whenever the upheaving and subsidence of

the waves allowed the deck of the lower to be seen from that of the higher.

As the brig overhauled the chase, Captain Vance directed his helmsman to steer to the larboard of the chase, on a line as near as it was safe to approach her; by this course he would not only take the weather-gage of the ship, but would also make his position more convenient to "speak" her.

"Mr. Bowsprit," said the captain to the officer who had charge of the cannon, "fire a shot across her bows. That is the best way to open the conversation."

The shot was immediately fired; and the reverberation was deafening, in the damp, heavy atmosphere.

The vessels were now not more than a hundred yards apart; so near were they to each other, that the shadow of the brig—the outlines of which were defined clearly by the light which came from the western sky, where the clouds were somewhat broken—fell almost aboard the ship.

The shot brought immediately a hail from the deck of the *Duchess*.

"Brig ahoy!" came through a speaking trumpet in stentorian tones from Captain Johnson.

"Ay, ay," was the answer.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" was the retort from the deck of the ship.

"The *Falcon*, free rover," replied Captain Vance, "and we want you to surrender."

T

"We will never surrender to pirates," answered Captain Johnson.

"If you surrender without resistance, we will spare the lives of all on board," said the captain of the *Falcon*.

"I would rather sink the ship," replied the captain of the *Duchess*.

"Woe-be to you then," exclaimed Captain Vance. "Your blood and that of those under your control be upon your own head."

All this conversation between the vessels had been carried on through speaking-trumpets.

"Mr. Seacome," said Captain Vance to his first lieutenant, "display the flag."

The pirate flag of those days, having a black ground with white skull and cross-bones displayed upon it, was immediately run up to the main mast-head of the brig.

The gale still continued to blow with great force, and the waves were running higher and higher. Though I have said that the vessels were about a hundred yards apart, it is not to be supposed that there was any regularity in the distance between them. Now one vessel would be far below, then far above the other, as she sank into the trough of a sea, or rose upon the crest of a wave. Now the surging waters would drive them farther apart, and now closer together. Meanwhile, near and far over the sea, the fiercely-labouring winds and billows loudly roared in wild unison their stern and complaining songs.

"Had we not better, captain," asked Seacome, "keep as near as we can to the ship until this gale has fallen, and then make the assault? We could scarcely board in such a wind as this, even should she surrender."

John Coe wished sincerely that this proposition should be adopted. Only in case of boarding the ship could he hope to carry out his plans; and it did not seem to him possible that boarding could be done in such a state of the weather. Should muskets be used, while the vessels were thus running side by side, his men—acting under his orders too—would, like the rest of the pirate-brig's crew, do all the damage they could to those on board the ship; and he would have no means of preventing them.

"It is not the wind that is in our way," answered Captain Vance to Mr. Seacome, "so much as the waves; and seas will run higher and higher while this gale continues. Our best chance is now. Mr. Bowsprit," he exclaimed, turning to that officer, "have you reloaded your gun?"

"Ay, ay, sir," was the answer.

"Then fire into them," said the captain, "and do them all the damage you can."

The Long Tom again pealed a savage note. But the only damage done to the *Duchess* was a small hole made through one of her sails.

The shot was immediately returned; it was fired by Captain Johnson's own hand. The ball passed through

the guards and swept across the deck of the *Falcon*, killing one man, and wounding two more by the splinters which it tore from the timbers through which it had forced its way. The loud peal of the cannon had not died away, when another shot from the *Duchess* came almost upon its track, again killing one and wounding two more.

"This will never do, Mr. Bowsprit," said Captain Vance. "Is your gun loaded again?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"Let me manage her this time," said the captain.

His shot was well aimed; it struck the guards of the *Duchess*, scattering the splinters far and wide.

"I'll guarantee that did them some damage," remarked Captain Vance.

Scarcely had he spoken, when two cannon-shots came in quick succession from the *Duchess*. The one struck the deck of the *Falcon*, tearing up the splinters; the other again struck the guards, scattering fragments of timber. One sailor was killed directly beside Captain Vance; three others were slightly wounded.

"Furies!" exclaimed the pirate chief, "that fellow knows his business. But this will never do. Give them a volley of musketry."

The loud roar of the Long Tom, and the rattling peal of the muskets immediately blended into one tremendous sound. That sound was instantly echoed from on board the ship; two cannon-shots and a dozen

musket-loads again poured devastation upon the deck of the brig.

"We must come to close quarters," exclaimed the pirate chief; "we are fast losing the advantage of superior numbers. The terrible skill of that devil with his cannon is destroying our superiority in that respect. Give me a loaded musket."

He waited until a partial lifting of the smoke-cloud gave him a glimpse of the stout, manly figure of Captain Johnson, then, in an instant, taking aim, he fired. The ceaseless motion of the vessels destroyed the effect of his aim; and the man who was fired at escaped unharmed.

"Pistols and cutlasses!" exclaimed Vance, much excited. "Prepare to board. Forward with your men, Captain Coe. Helmsman, put us alongside of that vessel at once."

"That's the way to talk," said Afton. "We'll give the whelps no mercy now."

"We may sink both vessels by collision," said Seacome; "in such a sea as this."

"Then let them sink," cried the pirate chief, all of whose evil passions were now aroused. "Lay us aboard quickly, helmsman."

The helmsman did his work skilfully; the starboard bow of the brig was brought to bear gradually towards the larboard bow of the ship; and the two vessels approached each other in such a manner that their sides

when they touched formed, at the point of contact, a very acute angle. The guards of the ship were above those of the brig ; yet grappling-irons were cast from the latter and the vessels were made fast together. But the independent rolling and pitching of each of them, which caused them sometimes to "yaw" asunder, sometimes to come together with a crash that sounded like thunder, made the passage from one to the other very dangerous.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOARDING ATTACK.

Together they came with a crashing and rending,
While the sounds of the battle and tempest were blending.
—*The Lost Ship.*

We will be true to you, most noble sir.—*Avator.*

Oh, spare my daughter! Take my wealth—I care not ;
But spare my daughter.—*Old Play.*

Villain, forbear !

Throw down your arms—surrender.—*The Assault.*

THE last fire from the *Falcon* had made sad havoc among the crew of the merchant vessel ; two men were killed and three badly wounded by it. Hence it was that, when the pirates were thronging the brig's side, preparing to spring on board the ship, Captain Johnson

had but nine men to aid him in resisting the assault, the tenth being at the wheel. The odds were fearfully against him, being more than three to one; the pirate chief, leaving ten men to take care of the brig, had still thirty-one men, besides those who had been placed *hors de combat*, with whom to board the ship.

While John Coe was standing by the starboard guards of the brig, prepared to spring on board of the ship, with every nerve wrought up to its highest tension, he ejaculated prayers to the Almighty to guard him from sin and guide him to goodness in this terrible crisis of his fate. Just as the vessels were coming together, he felt his arm touched, and turning, saw Ada by his side.

"For heaven's sake, madam," he said, in low but earnest tones, "what are you doing here? Do go into the cabin and seek out its safest corner. You are almost certain to lose your life here. This is no place for a helpless woman."

"How can I stay there," she said, "while these horrible scenes are taking place? I am inured to danger, and put no value on my life. Besides, I feel impelled by a power within me, and which I cannot resist, to take part in the scenes about to occur on board of that ship. I put myself by your side, both because my husband would drive me away from his, and because, of all who are about to board that vessel, you alone have no evil in your heart, but are seeking to prevent it; and I wish to aid you in that good work. See! I also am armed."

She showed a cutlass in her hand, and pointed to two double-barrelled pistols in a belt round her waist.

"Keep closely by my side, then," said John, seeing her determination. "I will do all that I can to protect you."

"Thank you," she replied.

John turned towards his other side; there, near to him, stood Billy Bowsprit.

"Bowsprit," he said, in a low voice, "keep near to me; and do not forget your pledge to give all the aid in your power to prevent, to such extent as we can, the shedding of innocent blood."

"Mr. Coe," answered Billy, earnestly and emphatically, yet in a whisper, "I am with you, heart and hand, I am yours in life and death."

"And see, too," said Coe, in the same low tones, "that the five men of my band, who are with us, keep near to us, and that you and they follow me wherever I go."

"They are here, sir," whispered Billy, "just behind you and me. Every man of them can be relied on; they are all devoted to you."

"And you and they," replied John, still in the same undertones, "may depend upon my fulfilling my promise, should I escape with life and freedom from the perils of this night."

Thus the thirty men of the *Falcon's* crew detailed for the boarding-party, stood by the guards of the brig upon that side of her towards the ship, waiting for the

moment when the up-heaving and subsidence of the waters should uplift the former and depress the latter, that they might seize the opportunity to leap down upon the deck of the *Duchess*.

Captain Johnson was also waiting for the same moment. He had stationed eight men each with a cutlass in his right hand and a pistol in his left, in a position to meet the pirates should they gain his deck. He had so carefully balanced and trained his two guns that, when they should be fired, the balls would come together at a short distance from the muzzles of the cannon. By one of these guns stood Captain Johnson himself, by the other one of his mates, upon whose coolness he could thoroughly depend. Each of these two resolute men held a lighted match in his hand.

By this time the sun had been half an hour below the horizon, and the short twilight of that southern latitude was fast darkening into a night of storm and of unusual gloom; for, although there was one clear spot in the western sky, all the rest of the face of heaven was veiled in heavy clouds.

In his anxiety to gain as soon as possible the deck of the ship, Captain Vance had not noted all the dispositions made on board the *Duchess*; his attention had been given mainly to the ordering of his own men, and to the eight men arranged for the reception of his assaulting party.

The critical moment, upon the results of which so

much of vital importance to the combatants depended, arrived. The brig rose high upon the summit of a huge billow, while the merchant ship descended into the valley between that and another monster wave. At that instant the pirates sprung towards the deck of the *Duchess*, the eight men of the latter, who had been placed to meet this assault, fired their pistols, and Captain Johnson and his mate applied the matches to the cannon.

Three of the pirates fell upon the ship's deck, two killed and one mortally wounded by the pistol-shots of their enemies; five made the leap too late, of whom two were crushed between the vessels, and fell into the sea, and three struck against the guards of the now rising ship, and were thrown back with violence upon their own deck. Captain Vance himself received a pistol-shot through the brain at the moment when he was about to spring from the guards of the *Falcon* to the deck of the *Duchess*; he disappeared between the two vessels and sunk into the sea.

John Coe—to avoid confronting the eight defenders of the ship—had taken his station with Ada, Billy Bowsprit, and the rest of the small party devoted to him, on the extreme left of the boarding-line of pirates. The next officer on his right was Lieutenant Afton, who was separated from him, however, by several men. At the extreme right of the whole line had been Captain Vance; Lieutenant Seacome being left in charge of the brig.

Thus, when young Coe, holding Ada by the hand, alighted on the deck of the *Duchess*, he found the second lieutenant of the *Falcon*—with a party of five men under his immediate command—between himself and the defenders of the ship. He saw the wretch Afton, ever intent upon spoil—after making, with all the assaulting party to his right, a rush against the ship's crew, which forced the latter to give back a space—detach himself with four men from the rest of the pirates, and, crossing the deck, hurry along the starboard side of the ship towards the entrance to the cabin.

It had been the first intention of Coe to throw himself, with his small force, between the contending parties, and to insist upon the pirates retiring to the brig; or, in case of their refusal to do so, to take sides against them in the fight. But, seeing that the odds against the ship's crew was now not so great, Captain Johnson and his mate having joined them, he determined, with his followers, to pursue Afton, and to prevent such mischief as he might be bent upon.

Captain Johnson, when he saw so many of the pirate crew hastening towards the cabin, was also anxious to follow them; but he was too hard pressed by his enemies to allow him to do so. He hoped, moreover, that the tenants of the cabin had had the forethought to barricade the door, in which case the pirates might be prevented from breaking in upon Mr. Durocher and his family until he could overpower the force immediately before

him, and then, turning upon those who had gone towards the cabin, might thus be able to overcome his enemies in detail.

The door of the cabin had been barricaded by Mr. Durocher, as well as he could do so, with the aid of his daughter and the quadroon girl, but the fastenings scarcely withstood for one moment the violent assault of Afton and his men.

They passed in without further opposition—the illness of Mr. Durocher preventing him from offering even a moment's resistance. An instant of silence ensued, and then, above the noise of conflict without arose the cries of distress from the cabin—the shrieks of women! That was the cry most agonizing to young Coe.

"Here, my brave fellows!" he shouted, "follow me, and remember your own mothers and sisters at home!"

He dashed off down the deck, past the assailants and assailed still struggling there, and, followed by Ada and his men, sprung into the cabin to confront Afton and his men in their fiendish scheme. Afton, having penetrated to the state-rooms, had seized Miss Durocher, and was trying to drag her forth, preparatory to removing her to the brig.

"Unhand that lady, villain!" shouted Coe.

"Villain yourself!" roared Afton. "Who made you my master, I should like to know?"

Afton was a strong man, but young Coe was both stronger and more active, and when he was aroused and

inflamed by a righteous anger the pirate was but a child in his hands. He said not another word; but releasing the lady from the grasp of the ruffian by a sudden and dexterous exertion, he seized the pirate with both hands and swung him with tremendous force through the state-room doorway into the saloon. So violently did the latter strike the floor, that he lay at once without sense or motion.

One of Afton's men, drawing a pistol, had pointed it at the head of the infuriated rescuer; but ere he could pull the trigger, Ada, who already had a pistol in her hand, fired, and broke his right arm, which fell powerless to his side. He stooped to pick up the weapon which he had dropped with the hand of his uninjured arm, but Ada drew another pistol from her belt and presented it at his head.

"If you attempt to take up that weapon again, Joe," she said, with firmness of purpose expressed in her tones, "you are a dead man."

The man yielded at once, and stood motionless and silent before the pistol which she continued to hold with the muzzle towards him.

At the same time when these scenes were occurring in the state-room, others were taking place in the saloon.

"Unhand that gentleman," said Bowsprit, to two men who held the sick Mr. Durocher prisoner.

"We are acting under the orders of the second-lieutenant," replied one of the men.

"Point your pistols at those men," said Bowsprit, addressing those under his command, himself presenting at them a weapon in each hand.

His orders were at once obeyed.

"We have pistols, too," gruffly said one of the men who held Mr. Durocher.

"Now," said Billy, "release your prisoner at once, or I'll warrant you'll never disobey orders again."

At this moment the body of Afton came rushing head foremost out of the state-room.

Seeing the condition of their officer, the two men unhanded Mr. Durocher, and sullenly threw their weapons upon the floor.

The fourth of the men who had accompanied Afton, and who had stood at the state-room door through all these scenes, apparently stupefied by surprise, quietly handed his pistols and cutlass to Bowsprit.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATE OF THE FALCON.

Sir, I thank you—

My heart is full of thanks to you.—*The Dream.*

JOHN.—Surrender, sir.

ISAAC.—Never ; we die first.—*Old Play.*

Full many a fathom deep they rushed
Down—down the dark abyss.—*Ballad.*

MR. DUROCHER, with the vivacity and warm-heartedness of a Frenchman, embraced young Coe, calling him his preserver, and overwhelming him with thanks.

“Thank only God, my dear sir,” replied the deliverer. “I am not doing even all my duty. How many lives may be lost on deck while I am delaying here! Mr. Bowsprit,” he continued, addressing that individual, “bind the hands of your prisoners at once, and then come, with your men, upon deck with me.”

Through the open door of the state-room he could see Ada, still pointing her pistol at Joe, whose right arm hung loosely at his side.

“Madam,” asked John, “is that man’s arm broken?”

“Yes,” she answered ; “I broke it with a pistol-shot; but I understand a little of surgery, and can easily set it if I can get a few splinters of wood.”

Mr. Durocher had hastened to his daughter and was

holding her in his embrace, when hearing the word madam addressed to a person in male attire, he said—

“From this gentleman calling you madam, I suppose that you are a woman, and understand those sudden sicknesses caused by excited feelings, and peculiar to women?”

“I am a woman,” answered Ada, blushing; “and I understand you. I see that your daughter has fainted. I will attend to her. Have you any salts?” she continued, addressing Celeste.

The poor quadroom girl was herself near to the point of swooning; but aroused herself when thus addressed, and hastened to bring the restoratives asked for. While she was searching for these among the vials and bottles of the medicine-case, Mr. Durocher laid his daughter upon the bed. He then turned to Ada, and said—

“You need not trouble yourself with that man any more. Let him come into my state-room adjoining this, and lie upon my bed. I understand something of surgery myself; I also have the materials for making splinters, and will dress his wound.”

Meantime, in the saloon, the hands of the prisoners were bound, even those of Afton. Leaving one of his men to guard the prisoners, Coe and the rest hastened upon deck. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed since he had left the deck—so many incidents may occur in a brief period of time, when the struggle is one of life and death.

The man who had been placed at the helm by Captain Johnson still kept his post. Through all the excitement and confusion, through the uproar and perils of the storm and the battle, that sturdy and brave seaman had, with unflinching patience and fidelity, and by a skilful management of the helm, watched for and warded off the effect of every huge wave which had threatened the safety of this ship. When the two vessels had come together, he had, by good guidance, broken to a great extent the force of the collision. When he had seen his comrades pressed by vastly superior numbers, and knew that his own safety depended on their successful defence—when he had seen the pirates hurry into the cabin where were only the sickly old man and the two helpless females—he had firmly maintained his post, steadily and faithfully performing the duties which had been assigned to him. He knew that upon him depended the safety of all on board; that the slightest neglect on his part, the slightest failure of hand or eye, might allow the ship to broach to and be swamped in the tremendous seas which were now running.

Fidelity to duty, in instances of this kind, exhibits the purest type of heroism of character. And such instances are very common in ordinary life, among all classes, and especially among the humblest. There is seldom any genuine heroism in mere fighting; when man's passions are stirred—whether by feelings right or wrong—and his animal nature thoroughly roused, fighting is an

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absolute enjoyment to him; and in battle there is the additional incentive of glory to urge him to acts of valour. But, too often, in the apparent stillness of quiet life, there are duties which are discharged amid ceaseless temptations to neglect them. These nobody notes as worthy of especial honour; because they occur every day, every hour. Many persons cross the Atlantic to see Niagara, and they talk of its grandeur and sublimity—and justly do they do so; yet who speaks of, or even notes the fact, which all must acknowledge, that the sky, which by day and by night bends over the head of every man, woman, and child in every part of the world, is a thousand times grander and more sublime than even the wonderful cataract? A blessed truth it is to the humble disciples of humble duty, that, though no earthly being observes them with praise, God sees them.

There was yet a faint glimmer of daylight when John Coe came upon the deck of the ship. In that dim light the fight was still going on. It had commenced with twelve men from the *Falcon* on the one side, and ten men belonging to the *Duchess* on the other. So nearly were the individuals of the contending parties balanced in personal strength and prowess, that the success of the pirates had been very nearly in exact proportion to their superiority of number. The loss was of two men upon each side, and the defenders of the ship had been driven back to a position very near to the quarter-deck; but of the pirates one was wounded and one was killed, while

of the defenders two only were wounded. Both of the parties were fighting with cutlasses only ; the pistols had all been fired in the beginning of the engagement, and there had since been no opportunity of reloading them.

Coe, with his small force, threw himself between the contending ranks, flashing his cutlass right and left, and striking upwards the clashing weapons.

"Hold your hands," he cried, in a loud voice. "My party is a small one ; but we are enough to settle this contest at once in favour of the side into whose support we may throw ourselves."

The pirates at once dropped their points and fell back ; they, of course, felt convinced that a reinforcement had come to their help. Captain Johnson and his men, however, naturally looking upon the new-comers as enemies, and supposing that Coe's mode of dealing with existing affairs was a *ruse* to take them at disadvantage, were not disposed to cease fighting so readily. Still, Captain Johnson reflected that it would be well to hear what proposition was to be made. He, therefore, dropped his point and retired a step or two, and ordered his men to cease fighting and to fall back. His command was immediately obeyed.

"Mr. Brown," said Coe, addressing Bowsprit, as soon as he saw that the fighting was suspended, "you and your men are supplied with two pistols apiece, I believe ?"

"Yes, sir," answered Billy.

"Are they all loaded?" asked Coe.

"All loaded," was the echoed answer.

"Then draw, each of you, one in each hand," said our hero, "and have each pistol ready for instant use. But keep your outlasses suspended by the cord from the right wrist."

Coe's order was instantly obeyed; and he himself at the moment prepared his weapons as he had commanded the others to prepare theirs.

"Gentlemen pirates," he said, sarcastically, addressing those of the boarding party who had been engaged in the fight, "you will remember that when I accepted the high and distinguished office of captain of marines on board of the brig *Falcon*, the free rover, I did so provisionally, and on the express condition that I retained the right of resigning whenever I should think proper to do so. I exercise that reserved right now. I resign the honourable post so flatteringly offered to me; and I am, therefore, no longer a member of the gallant band composing the crew of the brig *Falcon*."

"What's the meaning of all this fine talk?" asked a gruff-looking pirate. "What have we got to do with your affairs at this time?"

"It means that I never have been, and never have intended to be, a pirate," answered the captain; "I had rather die a thousand deaths than be one of your kind. I was taken prisoner by deceit, and was then

entirely in your power; yet, even in such circumstances, my first impulse was to defy your whole band and thus to bring on my own death rather than to seem to become a member of your ship's company. I was induced to act as I have done, partly by the advice of a friend whom circumstances had forced to remain among you, but mainly by the conviction that the Ruler of Events would not have allowed me to be taken prisoner by you merely for the purpose of permitting my death. I hoped not only that I might thus be able to make my escape, but that I might prevent some of the evil which you are accustomed to do in your vocation, and might also find amongst your number some whom I could induce to become again honest men. I see a good prospect of success in all these objects."

"What's the use of all this argufying?" said the sailor who had before spoken, and who was boatswain of the *Falcon*. "Tell us what do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"What I mean is this," answered Coe: "Lay down your arms at once and surrender. You have no chance of defending yourselves successfully against such odds as will now be opposed to you."

"You don't mean to say," said the boatswain, "that Lieutenant Bowsprit and them others there have turned agin us?"

"We are all," answered Bowsprit, "pledged to stand by Mr. Coe for life or death."

"As to them other fellows there," said the boatswain, "I never had much faith in them; but I didn't think, lieutenant, that you would ever desert us."

"I am determined," replied Bowsprit, "to live hereafter, and to die, an honest man."

"And to get yourself hanged," sneered the sailor.

"I had rather things should come to that," said Bowsprit, "than ever to be a pirate again."

"Come," said Coe; "you must decide quickly. Do you surrender?"

"Never," answered the boatswain. "We can hold out until old bully Afton comes from the cabin—confound him, he's always after the gals and the rhino—we shall then be equal to you. Never say 'die'—heh, boys?"

The pirates answered him by cheers, mingled with oaths, swearing that they would rather die where they stood like men, than to be hanged like dogs.

"You need not expect help from Afton or his men," said the resolute Coe, addressing the pirates; "I have them all bound in the cabin."

"Mr. Coe," said Bowsprit, who did not like to take a part in consigning any of his old comrades to the gallows, "suppose we allow them to escape to the *Falcon*?"

That question was never answered.

The reference made by Bill Bowsprit to the brig caused most of the pirates, and the boatswain among the number, to turn their faces towards the vessel. What they saw determined them to immediate action. Most

men come to a resolution very speedily when a sudden emergency leaves them but a brief time for doing so.

When the two cannon were fired by Captain Johnson and one of his mates at the very moment when the pirates boarded the *Duchess*, the effect of the rebound of the guns upon one vessel and of the striking of the shot upon the other had a violent tendency to drive the ship and the brig apart. The hold of the grappling-irons and other fastenings which kept the two vessels together was therefore, much weakened by the shock. The violent dashing against each other of the ship and the brig had not only carried away a considerable part of the upper-works, but threatened, if continued much longer, to dash in the very sides of the two vessels; of course, this ceaseless motion tended to weaken more and more the bonds which held the ship and the brig together.

At the very moment when the boatswain and others of the pirates looked towards the brig, these fastenings gave way, and the two vessels were about to part.

"Come, boys! quick!" cried the boatswain, rushing towards the guards of the ship. He was immediately followed by all of his men who were left alive, except the one who lay wounded upon the ship's deck. The next instant they sprang from the broken guards of the *Duchess* towards the deck of the *Falcon*; in the confusion and hurry three of them missed the leap, fell into the sea and were drowned. At the same time the vessels parted.

When the boatswain gained the brig, he turned round to those whom he left on the deck of the ship, shook his fist, and exclaimed, in a voice that was heard above the sound of the wind and the sea :

“Look out for the Long Tom !”

“We should not have allowed them to escape,” said John Coe to Captain Johnson.

“It is better as it is,” said the captain. “We have escaped from a fate so terrible, that all minor perils are but as trifles in comparison. I know not who you are, young gentleman ; but your appearance and action among us have been so wonderful that it almost seems as if you were an angel sent from heaven to rescue us.”

“You do me too much honour,” said the young man. “But I will explain to you everything when we have leisure. At present, there are the wounded to be attended to.”

“True,” replied the captain. Then turning to his men, he added, “Bring lights, some of you, and remove the wounded below.”

By this time the vessels were some twenty yards apart.

“See !” exclaimed Billy Bowsprit, “they are loading the cannon on board the *Falcon*.”

Only dimly through the night shadows could the deck of the brig be seen ; for now the last vestige of daylight had departed.

Some of the men who belonged to the *Duchess* were enabled to assist in loading the two cannon ; for Captain

Johnson had expressed his determination that, if a shot was fired from the pirate brig, he would, as before, return them two for one.

"The two shots which I fired at the moment of their boarding us," he said to Coe, "made a good-sized hole in their hull just above the water-mark ; and they must have taken in considerable water through it, during the tossing and pitching of the brig. I will make another hole in their timbers if they fire at me again."

Even while he spoke a shot came from the *Falcon*. It was fired, probably, by the skilful hand of Seacome ; for it again carried away a part of the guards. Fortunately, no one was injured.

Captain Johnson quickly responded with his two guns. His object was to strike the enemy's hull, near where his last two shots had struck ; and he probably did so, for, in a few moments afterwards—by the light of the lamps on board the *Falcon*—men were seen hurrying to and fro in apparently great excitement. Loud tones were also heard, seemingly giving orders.

All who were on the deck of the *Duchess* stood still, listening and watching.

"Your shot must have done them serious damage," said Coe, at length, to Captain Johnson ; "the excitement seems to increase."

"It seems to me," said Billy Bowsprit, who was watching things sharply, "the *Falcon* is settling in the water."

Upon the background of the sky, the spectators on board the *Duchess* could see the masts of the brig slowly bend forward ; still slowly for awhile they moved onward in the same direction, sinking, sinking from the horizontal line in the sky which they had formerly touched ; and then their motion was gradually accelerated.

" See ! " exclaimed Bowsprit, " her bows are going under, as sure as my name is William."

That instant, a wild, despairing and mingled cry arose from the deck of the *Falcon* ; the next moment that gallant craft plunged head-foremost into the sea and disappeared.

" God have mercy on their souls ! " exclaimed Captain Johnson. " The best among them can be but little prepared to enter the other world."

The captain of the *Duchess* then ordered a thorough examination to be made of the damage done to his ship. For many feet along the larboard beam and larboard bow the guards were almost entirely torn away. From the fact that the ship was also leaking, it was evident that the planks had been started somewhat where the larboard side of the *Duchess* had been beaten against by the starboard of the *Falcon* ; a single pump kept regularly at work easily balanced the effects of this leak. A part of this labour was performed by some of Billy Bowsprit's men, all of whom—at the suggestion of Coe—reported themselves to Captain Johnson for duty as a part of his crew.

Afton and three of his men who were unwounded were put in irons and removed to safe keeping in the forward part of the ship ; and the man whose arm had been broken by Ada Marston's shot was placed with the rest of the wounded in the sailor's quarters, where they were all made as comfortable as circumstances would allow. After these tasks had been attended to, Captain Johnson read the "funeral service at sea" over the bodies of the dead, which, enshrouded and with weights attached to them, were launched into the ocean. The decks were then scrubbed by the light of lanterns, the watch set for the night, and all made secure.

These duties being performed, Captain Johnson, Coe, and Bowsprit went down into the cabin, to look after the condition of things there. They found Louise recovered from her swoon, but still very pale and nervous. She sat beside the sofa, on which lay her father, very ill from the shock of his recent terrible excitement. The quadroon girl was crouched upon the floor at the feet of her mistress ; she also was very pale, and her eyes still had a wild and alarmed look. Ada, too, sat upon the floor, at a little distance from the others, her head against the seat of a chair, and her face hidden in her hands. She had been upon deck and had seen the brig sink in the ocean. She had learned of her husband's death ; that she was weeping proved that she was a woman.

There was not much rest for Captain Johnson that night ; the leaky condition of his ship, and the still strong gale and high-rolling waves kept him on the alert. Billy Bowsprit, who was a thorough seaman, insisted upon watching with the captain. Coe was assigned a berth in one of the state-rooms forward of the saloon. Knowing that he could be of no further use, he consented to retire for the night. Being much fatigued, he soon fell asleep, in dreams to recall, in forms more or less distorted, all the incidents of the day ; yet amid all the scenes which his memory presented to his imagination, bent over him the soft, appealing eyes, the pale and beautiful face of Louise Durocher.

CHAPTER XIII.

GATHERED ENDS.

Melting and mingling into one
Two kindred souls.—*Anon.*

And so his life was gently exhaled in peace.—*Anon.*

Hail, wedded love!—*Paradise Lost.*

That's the very moral on't.—*Nym.*

THE gale continued blowing all that night, all the next day, and for two or three days following. The injured condition of the ship made it unsafe for her to contend against the force of so strong a wind; and she was, therefore, kept directly before it. While the *Duchess* was thus running before the wind, two of the wounded pirates and three of the wounded of the ship's crew died, and were committed to the deep. The man whose arm had been broken by Ada's pistol-shot, and the other two of the wounded men belonging to the ship's company, recovered before the arrival of the vessel in port.

A consultation was held in Mr. Durocher's state-room, on the day after the fight, between Mr. Durocher himself, Captain Johnson, and John Coe, to which Billy Bowsprit was also admitted, and in which it was determined that as soon as the gale should abate, the ship should be steered for the nearest port in the United States. This

determination was formed, that the ship might receive the necessary repairs, and that the captured pirates might be surrendered to the Government whose citizens they were.

On the fourth day after the fight the wind from the west had so abated that the course of the ship was changed, and she was headed towards the west. On the fifth day a fresh wind from the north arose; and, impelled by it, the *Duchess* made good progress for the American coast.

Meanwhile, the gallant young Marylander had become intimately acquainted with Mr. Durocher and his daughter. He told to them the singular history of his connection with the pirates, of which Ada had already given them some particulars. The warm-hearted old French gentleman became much attached to the brave fellow, upon whom he could not look, he said, without remembering the awful horror from which he had delivered his daughter and himself. Besides, he esteemed him as an impersonation of courage and genius, because, in circumstances in which, according to ordinary apprehension, it seemed impossible to avoid being forced to the commission of crime, he had not only overcome his enemies, saving the penitent, and destroying the hopelessly guilty, but had also escaped from all the difficulties which had surrounded him, with his own hands unstained by human blood.

The fair and gentle Louise, too, was no insensible to

the merits of her deliverer ; her fervid feelings recognised in him a personification of the knights of old ; and, with the spirit of self-sacrifice which greatly influences the tender and amiable of her sex, she longed to devote the services of her life to him in requital for her salvation from a horrible doom.

It must be confessed that "the deliverer" was not unimpressible nor unimpressed. Fixed for ever in his memory was the image of that young and loving girl, as he first beheld her when she lay pale, senseless, and perfectly helpless in the power of the pirate. And when he saw her afterwards, fully awakened to life, and her intelligent and enthusiastic mind and kind and loving heart expressing themselves in every glance of her soft blue eyes, in every flush that tinged her fair cheeks, in every expression of her beautiful lips, and in every musical sentence that issued from between them, he could scarcely realize that the bright form, clad in white robes, expressive of purity, and the shining face, surrounded by a halo of golden hair, belonged not to an angelic presence.

Indeed, these two young hearts required but an uttered word to cause the fountain of mutual love, like the waters of Horeb brought forth by the touch of the prophet's wand, to pour out for each other its treasures of tenderness. And that word was at length spoken, with the entire approbation of Mr. Durocher, whose friendship and fatherly regard for the young man was almost as great as his daughter's love.

The merchant's health, already weak, had received a terrible shock from the agony which his heart experienced on the evening of the assault of the pirates, a shock from the effects of which he never recovered, and when the *Duchess* entered Charleston Harbour, three weeks after that dreadful evening, he had to be carried on a bed from the boat to the rooms engaged for his party at the hotel. To this house, Ada Marston and John Coe accompanied him.

Immediately on arriving at Charleston, John wrote to his parents, informing them of all the remarkable adventures which had befallen him, and mentioning the state of affairs between Louise and himself. In due course he received letters from his father and mother, stating the great happiness of all the family at hearing of his safety, and expressing the full and joyous consent of Mr. and Mrs. Coe to the engagement of their son with Miss Durocher.

These letters gave great satisfaction to Mr. Durocher. He learned from them that his child was about to enter a family by whom she would be received and cherished as indeed a daughter and sister. As his health was rapidly failing, and he felt that death was near at hand, he expressed an earnest desire that the marriage ceremony between John and Louise should not be postponed; he wished, before his departure, to see his daughter in the lawful care of a protector in whose honourable character and sincere love for her he himself

had perfect faith. His will was law under the circumstances; and, on the second day after the receipt of the letters from Millmont, John Alvan Coe and Louise Durocher were united for life, at the bedside of the bride's dying father, by a minister of the church to which all the parties belonged.

Mr. Durocher survived his daughter's marriage but two weeks. His sick-bed was waited on by two attentive and affectionate children, and his last days were soothed by the knowledge that he had done all that could be done to secure for his beloved child a happy life.

A few days after the death of Mr. Durocher, John Coe and his wife left Charleston, and arrived in due course of time at the young husband's old home at Millmont—but a little more than two months after he had disappeared from the latter place in a manner apparently so mysterious.

In less than a year John realized the amount of his wife's fortune, with a part of which a large estate was purchased in one of the upper counties of Maryland. Upon this estate a handsome building was erected, to which he removed his family in the second year of his marriage. His descendants, distinguished, like their ancestors, for intellect and energy, still occupy that mansion.

A few words must be allowed with regard to our other characters.

Afton and the four pirates taken prisoners with him,

X

were tried, a few months after their capture, before one of the United States Courts, in Baltimore, to which port their vessel had belonged. They were all found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. Two of them died in prison before the day appointed for their execution, the other three—of whom the ruffian Afton was one—suffered the extreme penalty of the law.

John Coe kept his promise to Billy Bowsprit and the five repentant pirates. His father's influence, and that of all his father's friends, was used to obtain their pardon; and when it was made clearly apparent that but for their help the result of the fight between the *Duchess* and the *Falcon* would have been entirely different, that pardon was readily granted.

Perhaps the reader has some desire to know what was the future fortune of Ada.

She accompanied Coe and his wife from Charleston to Maryland. Here a fresh grief awaited her. Her father, in alarm at hearing of the safety and early return of young Coe, and in dread of the consequences of the exposure which must ensue, had hastily and rashly taken his own life.

By the death of her father without a will, she became heir to one half of his wealth, there being but one other child of Mr. Ashleigh, a grown son, to divide his property with her. She thus became an heiress; and several young gentlemen in the neighbourhood of Drum Point and elsewhere were quite willing, on account of

her riches and her great beauty, to forget that she was the daughter of a receiver of smuggled goods and the widow of a pirate, and made her a tender of their hands. Ada, however, politely declined all these disinterested offers. About a year and a half after the death of her first husband she was married to Billy Bowsprit. Billy had been the only person on board the brig who had invariably treated her with kindness and respect; he had been her champion on all occasions, and she knew that he was devoted to her. Moreover, he could not upbraid her for having been the wife of a pirate.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown (to give them their right title) wished to be away from the neighbourhood of those who were acquainted with their antecedents. The lady's portion of her father's estate was, therefore, soon after her marriage, converted into funds, with which a large plantation was purchased in Mississippi. To this they removed, where they prospered, and some of their descendants still flourish in that State.

THE END.

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